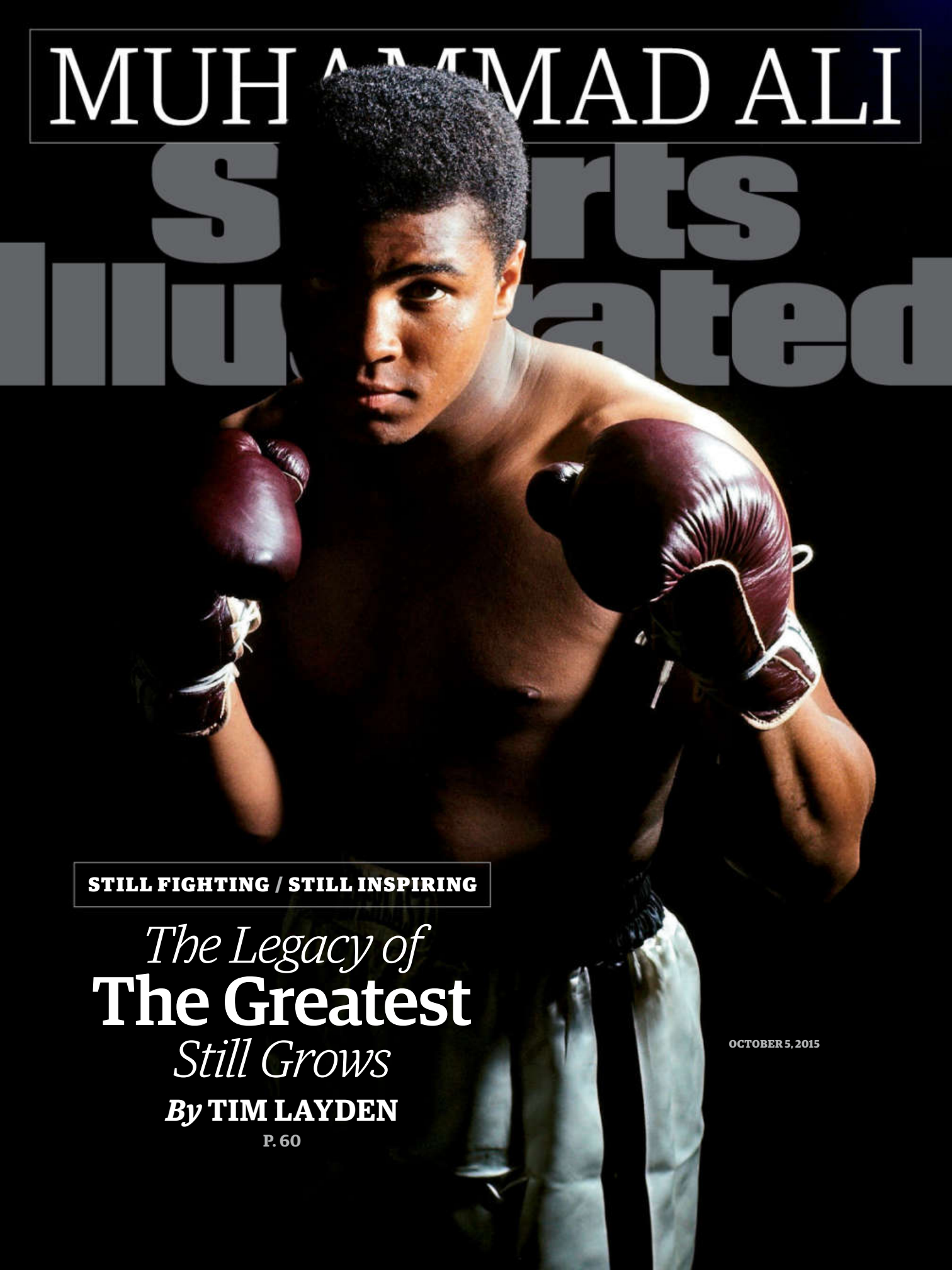
MUHAMMAD ALI

Sports Illustrated



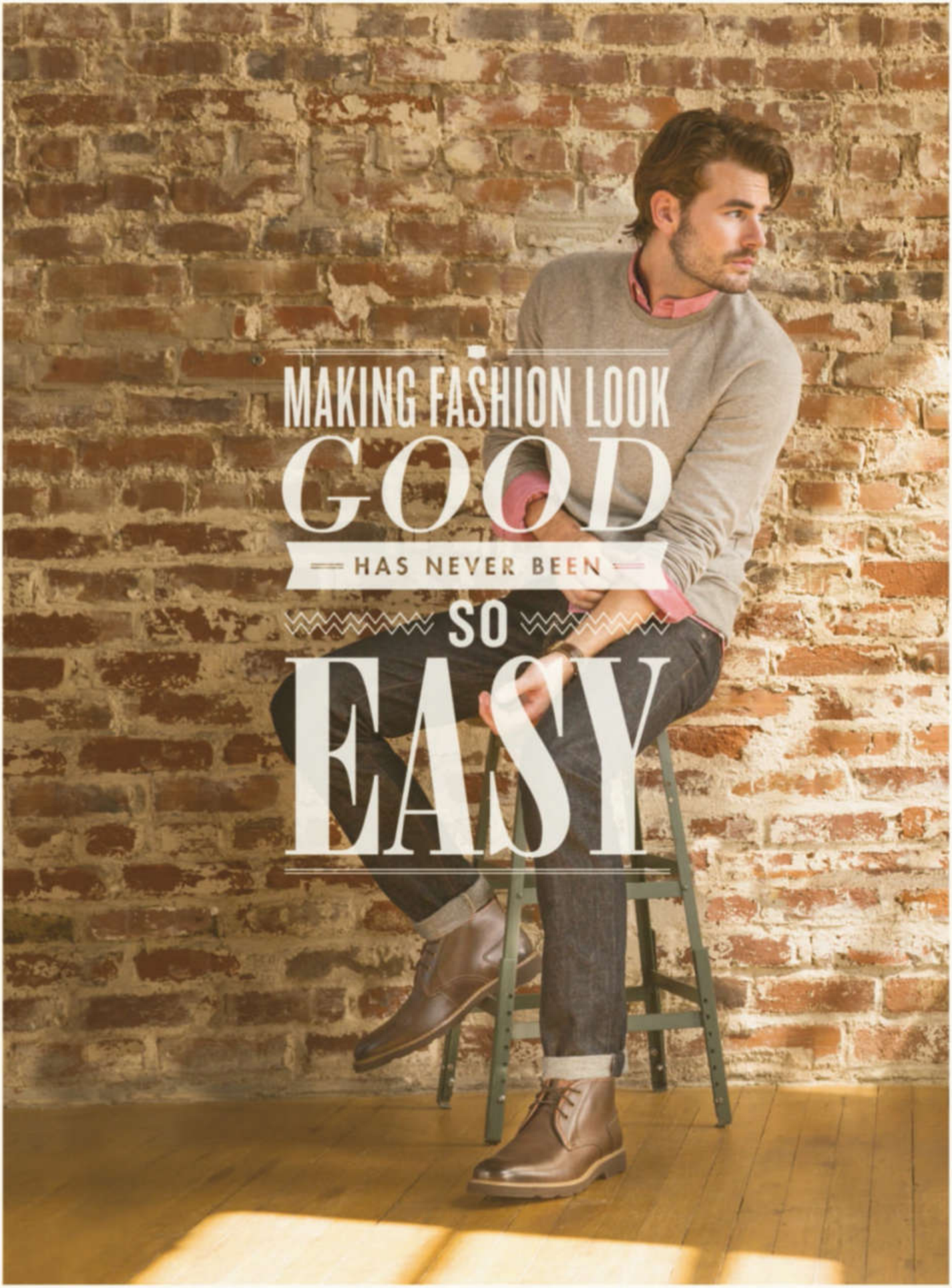
STILL FIGHTING / STILL INSPIRING

The Legacy of The Greatest *Still Grows*

***By* TIM LAYDEN**

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OCTOBER 5, 2015


MAKING FASHION LOOK
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BACK HOME

Berra, who died on Sept. 22, paid a last visit to the old Yankee Stadium in 2008.

Photograph by **Jim McIsaac** Getty Images

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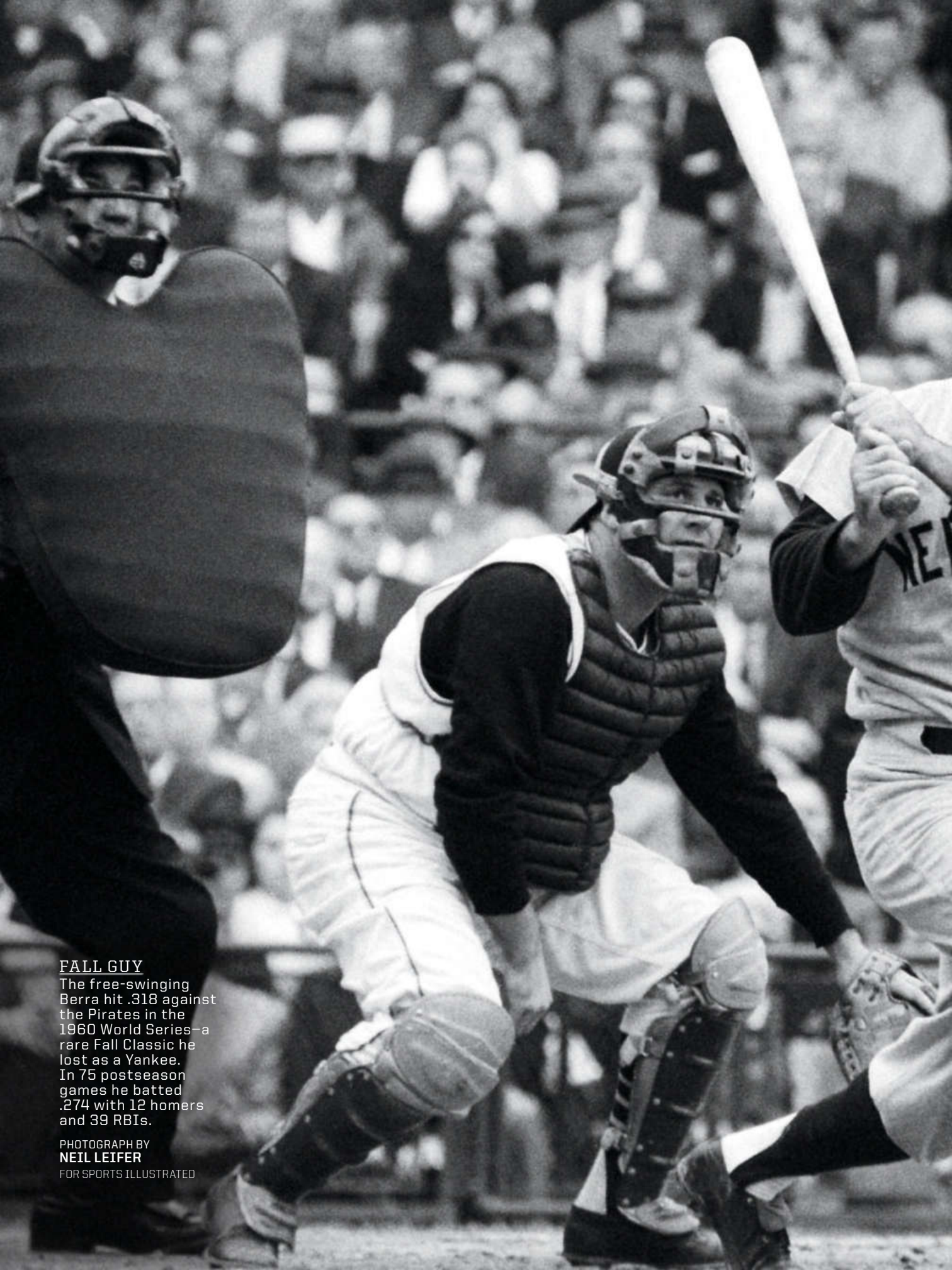
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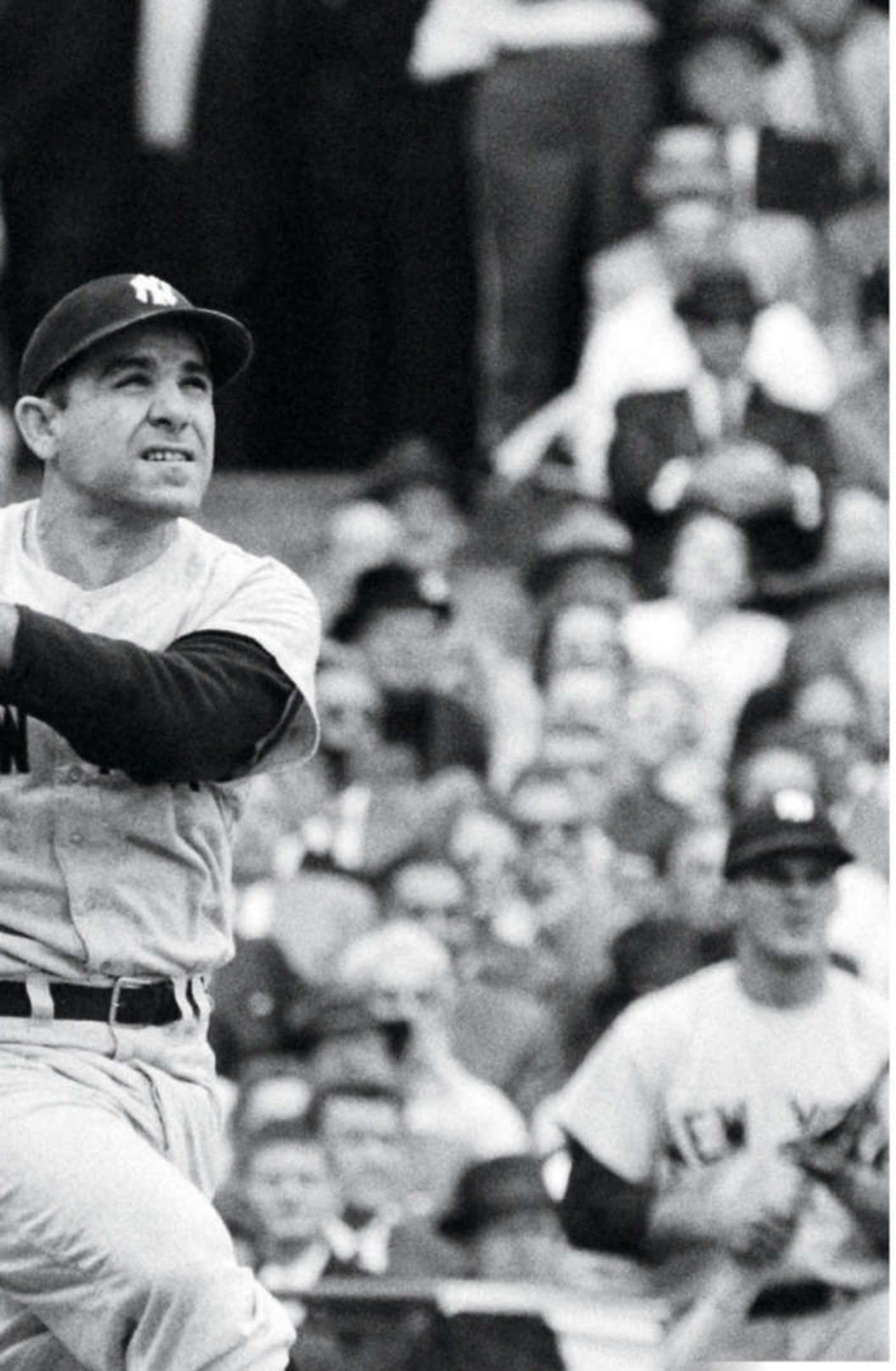
LEGACY
60
Muhammad Ali
SI names an annual award in The Greatest's honor
By Tim Layden

Sports Illustrated



FALL GUY
The free-swinging Berra hit .318 against the Pirates in the 1960 World Series—a rare Fall Classic he lost as a Yankee. In 75 postseason games he batted .274 with 12 homers and 39 RBIs.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
NEIL LEIFER
FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED



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Leading Off

Yogi Berra

1925-2015

BY TOM VERDUCCI

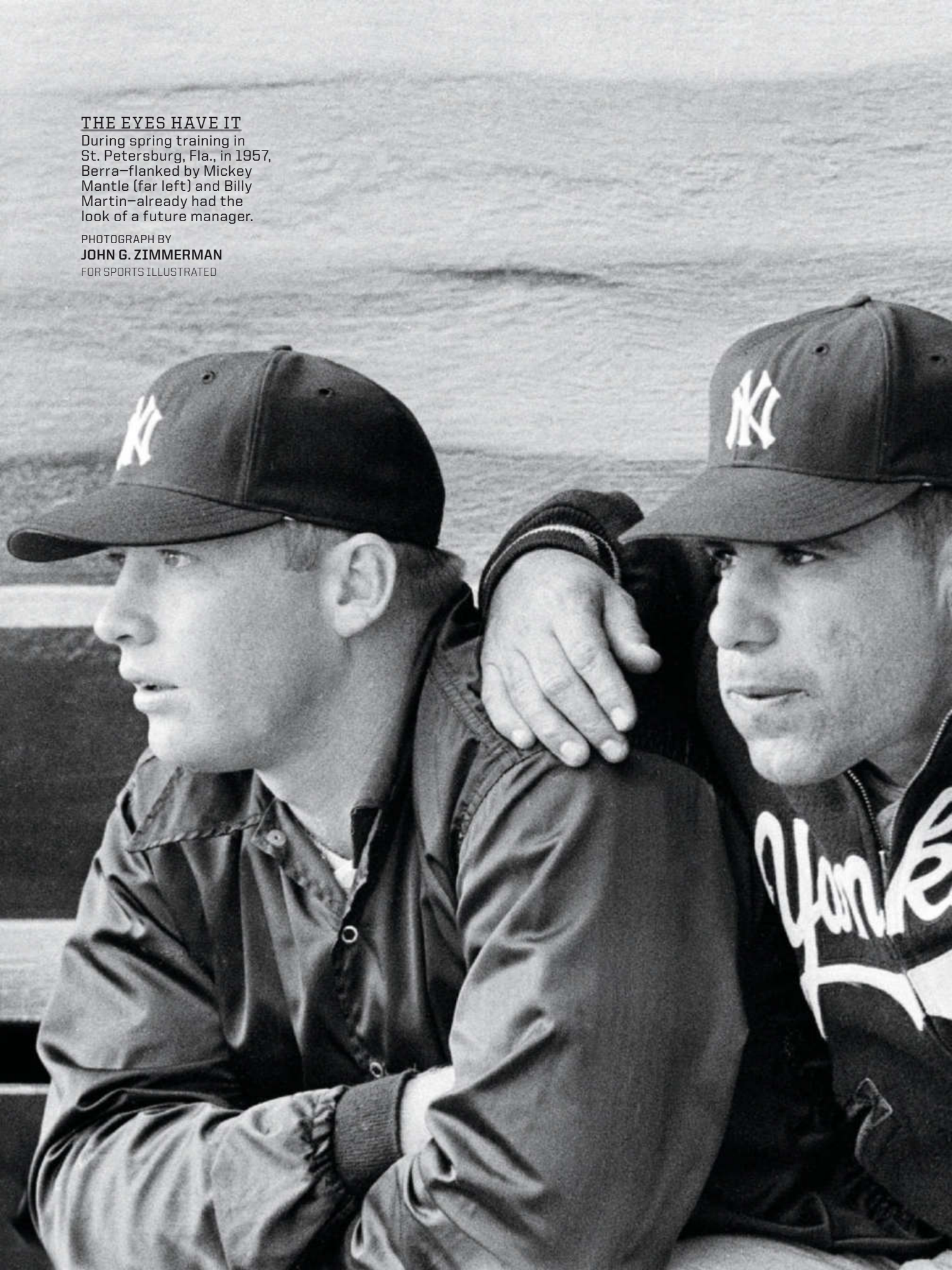
At 4:33 a.m. on June 6, 1944, under overcast skies, just before dawn broke over Omaha Beach, a 36-foot steel boat was lowered from a U.S. battleship into the dark waters of the English Channel. Inside this boat—in Navy terms, a Landing Craft, Support (Small) boat; in relative terms, a bathtub—hunkered a commanding officer and six sailors. One of those sailors was a 19-year-old, first-generation American from St. Louis named Lorenzo Pietro Berra, or Lawrence Peter Berra, or better still, to you, me and posterity, Yogi Berra.

Seaman 2nd Class Berra fought at D Day from one of the smallest crafts in the world's biggest assault. He was grazed by a bullet from a German machine gun (he earned a Purple Heart, though to not worry his mother, he never applied for it) and came through the war with a Distinguished Unit Citation, two battle stars, a European Theater of Operations ribbon and the beginnings of what was nothing less than the quintessential, if not



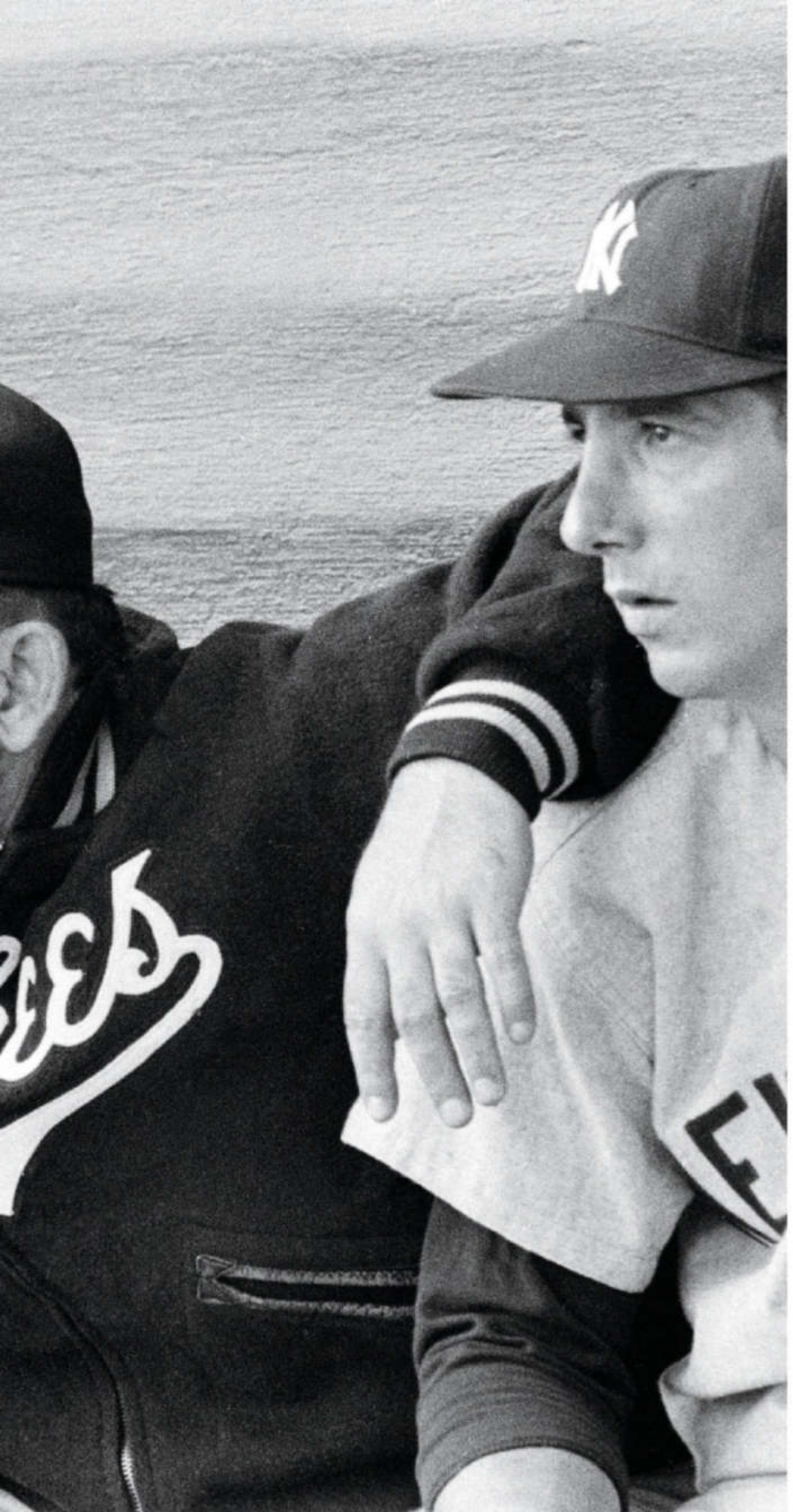
A TRIBUTE

To order SI's special commemorative issue of stories about Berra and photographs from his career, go to **backissues.si.com**



THE EYES HAVE IT
During spring training in St. Petersburg, Fla., in 1957, Berra—flanked by Mickey Mantle (far left) and Billy Martin—already had the look of a future manager.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JOHN G. ZIMMERMAN
FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED



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Leading Off

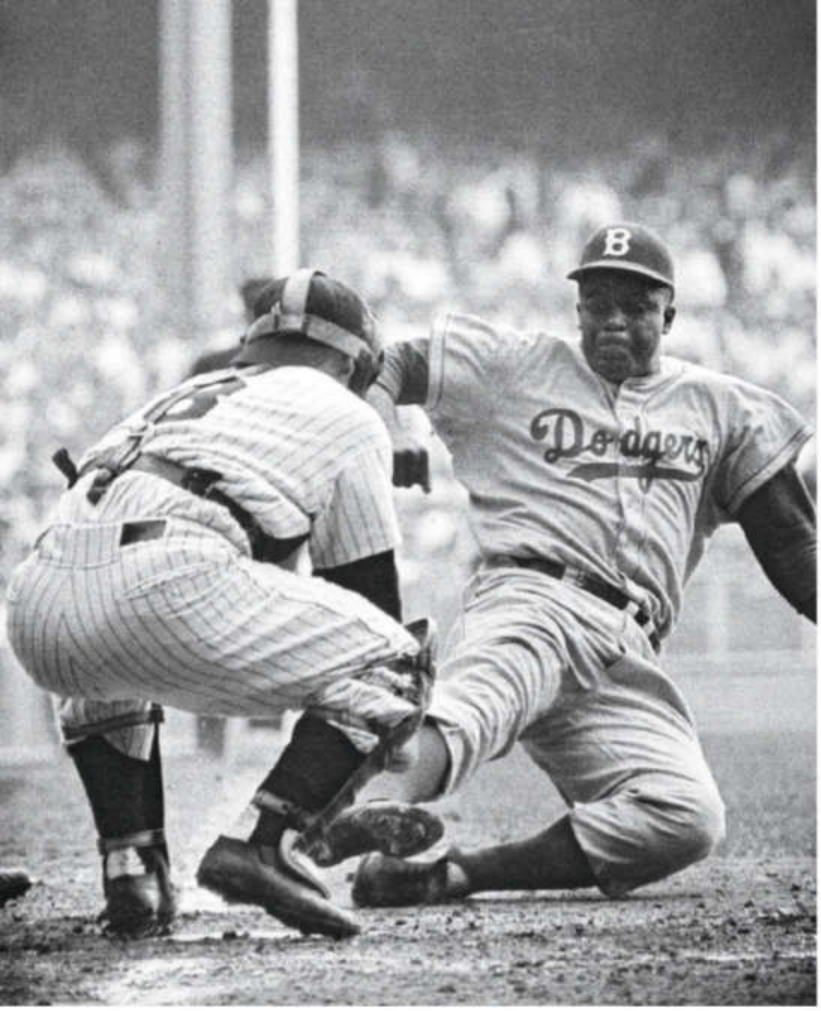
outlandishly charmed, Great American Life.

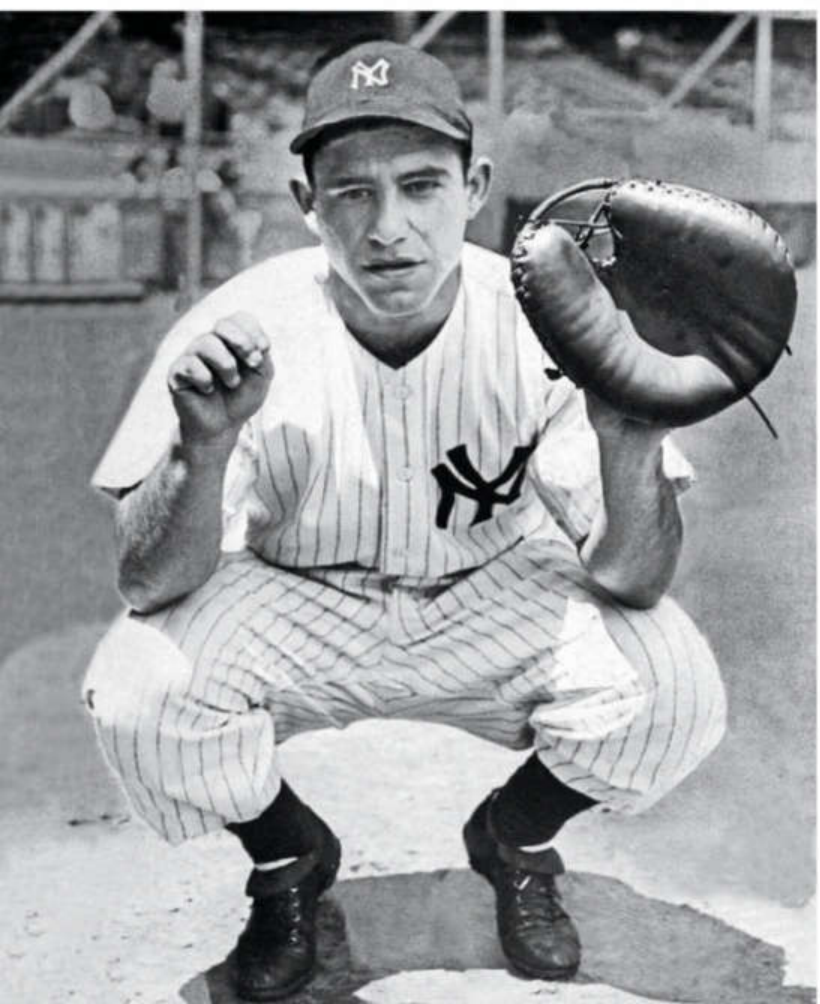
Twenty-seven months after D Day, wearing the famed Yankees pinstripes, the 5' 7", 185-pound Berra stood in the lefthand batter's box at Yankee Stadium for his first major league game. Jesse Flores of the Philadelphia Athletics threw him an outside curveball. Berra whacked it into the rightfield seats for his first home run. The next day he hit another one.

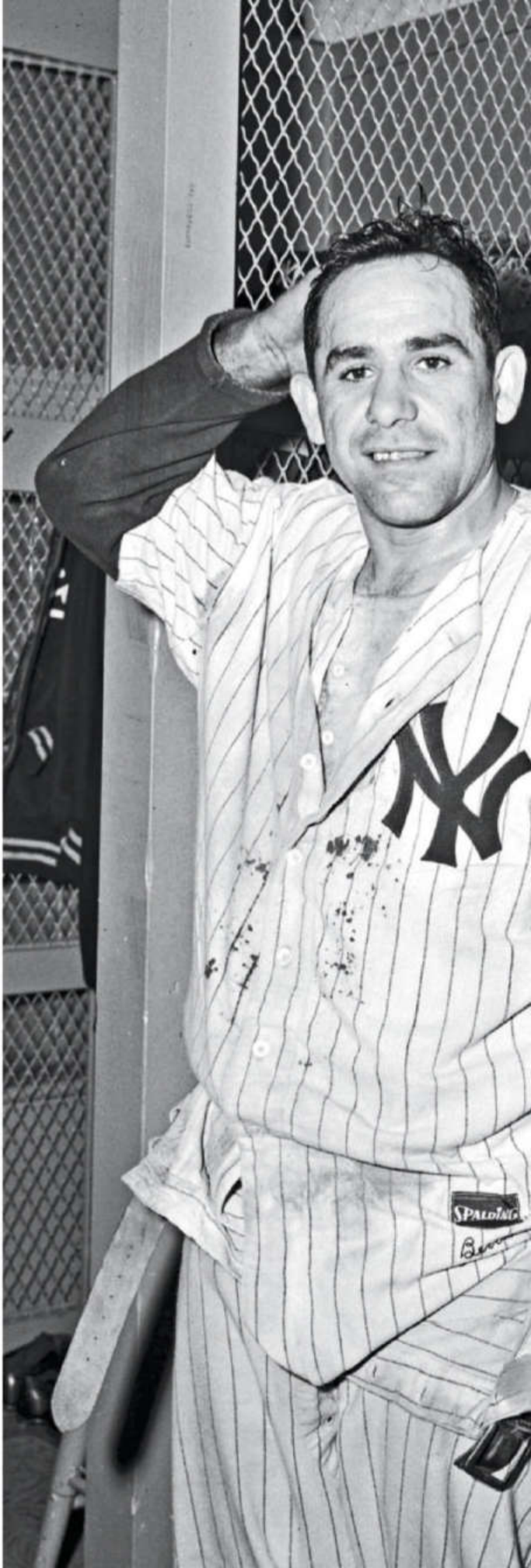
Berra would go on to become arguably the greatest catcher in baseball history and inarguably the greatest winner the game has ever known. In that spot between integration (1947) and expansion ('61), when baseball was the unchallenged great American pastime, only Stan Musial drove in more runs than Berra. He played in 14 World Series, winning a record 10, and participated in seven more as a coach or a manager—putting him in 21 of the 34 Series played between 1947 and '81. From 1950 to '56 he put together a run of MVP finishes of third, first, fourth, second, first, first and second.

No one knew more success or took part in more famous baseball moments. "Talking to Yogi Berra about baseball," onetime commissioner Bart Giamatti said, "is like talking to Homer about the gods."

Turning words into taffy was, of course, as much Berra's natural talent as putting solid wood to a baseball, no matter how unsightly the pitch or his swing. With only an eighth-grade education, Yogi leaves a presidential library full of malapropisms


B
Dodgers



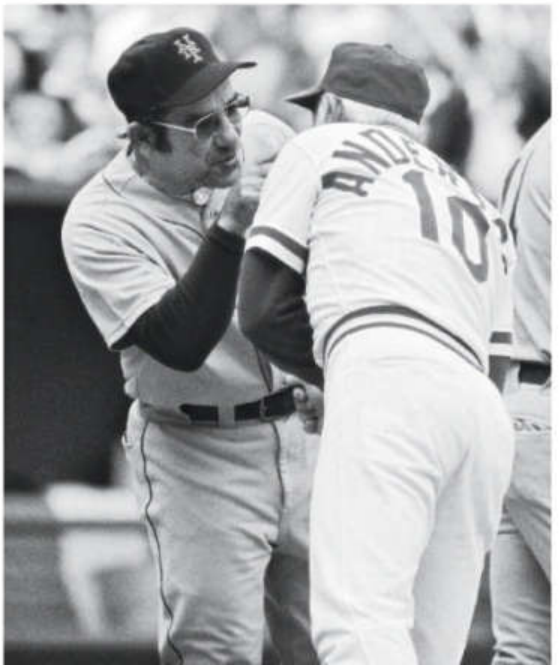

SPALDING



NEW YORK STORY
Clockwise from bottom left: A 15-time All-Star backstop in the Bronx beginning in the late 1940s, Berra dueled with the Brooklyn Dodgers' Jackie Robinson in the '55 Series and struck a pose at Yankee Stadium in '58 before going on to Queens to manage the Mets, where he handled ace Tom Seaver, gabbed with old pal Joe DiMaggio and trumped Reds manager Sparky Anderson in the 1973 playoffs.







and observations that mine wisdom from simplicity. Remarks such as "It ain't over till it's over" made him, as *The New Yorker* observed in 1991, the successor to Winston Churchill as the most quotable figure in the world.

At the time of his death on Sept. 22, near his home in Montclair, N.J., the 90-year-old Berra might have been as popular and cherished as ever, even though he played his last big league game, as a player-coach for the Mets, in 1965. He starred in television commercials that ran for years, especially with the Aflac insurance duck, and between 1997 and 2009 he wrote or cowrote eight books.

But he was beloved even more because he was a God-fearing man who knew humility was a virtue, not a weakness; who wrote love letters to his wife, Carmen, from the road; who into his advanced years still carried in his wallet a picture of his parents; who never spoke ill of others; who lacked the gifts of extraordinary size, appearance and skills but owned the rare one of the ability to laugh at himself. In short, Yogi was the real deal, the genuine goods.

Shortly after this new century began, CNN caught up with Berra and asked him to reflect on his wide, expansive life. Yogi, ever sweet, ever sage, ever wonderful, replied, "If I had to do it all over again, I would do it all over again." □

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: NY DAILY NEWS ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES; MARK KAUFFMAN FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED; OLEN COLLECTION/DIAMOND IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; NEIL LEIFER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED; FOCUS ON SPORT/GETTY IMAGES; JOHN IACONO FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED



Modern Epics

→ BY CHRISTIAN STONE

LEGACY, LIKE its first cousin *legend*, is an often misappropriated word, this franchise not exempted. This issue, however, features two figures for whom the term cannot be applied or intuited too freely: Yogi Berra and Muhammad Ali. Their contributions are measured not only in rings and belts, in home runs and knockouts, in honorary degrees and the hundreds of millions they've raised in philanthropic efforts, but also in ways more abstract. Of Berra, who died last week at age 90 *(page 6)*, his former teammate Dr. Bobby Brown once said, "Every time I see him, I feel a little better about the human race."

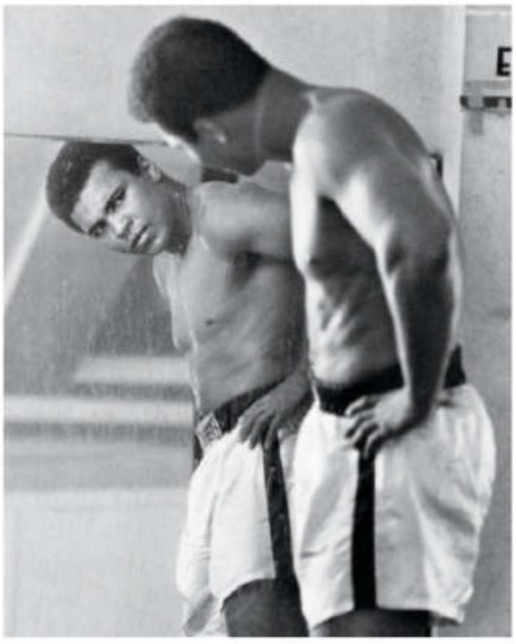
Ali's legacy is more complex, both complicated and enriched by stands for which he is lionized today but was vilified in the real-time political swirl of the 1960s. To be close to the man, however, gives that legacy a sudden, unmistakable clarity. In his story that begins on page 60, SI senior writer Tim Layden relates the story of Janet Evans's first meeting with Ali a day before the opening ceremony of the 1996 Atlanta Games. Evans, a four-time swimming gold medalist, learned that she'd be passing the Olympic torch to its final bearer, Ali.

"At that point in my life I was struggling to find the real meaning of the Olympics," Evans tells Layden. "They are supposed to mean people getting out on that stage and doing their best. In America it means win gold medals. But then you see this man, and he's come back to the Olympics, in the South, after the civil rights movement, and with his physical issues, and he was so courageous to stand there in front of the world."

ALI HAS been standing in front of the world for more than five decades, diminished physically by a 35-year struggle with Parkinson's disease, but as robust a symbol and agent of social and humanitarian change as ever. On Thursday, Oct. 1—coincidentally 40 years to the day after arguably the greatest heavyweight fight, the Thrilla in Manila between Ali and Joe Frazier—SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, in a ceremony at the Ali Center in Louisville, will dedicate its annual Legacy Award in the name of Ali. In mid-December his wife, Lonnie, will present the Sports Illustrated Muhammad Ali Legacy Award at our Sportsman of the Year ceremony in New York City.

The idea to honor Ali was hatched two months ago by the trio of SI assistant managing editor Steve Cannella, experiential marketing director Hillary Drezner and Time Inc. senior executive producer of video Ian Orefice. But the link between the award and Ali can be traced all the way back to a 1998 dinner in which the Arthur Ashe Foundation honored Ali. In the audience that evening was then SI senior editor Greg Kelly, who was moved especially by the speech of another honoree, a Special Olympian named Loretta Claiborne. Ms. Claiborne spoke about the impact that Eunice Kennedy Shriver had upon her life and the thousands who have participated in the Special Olympics, which was founded by Mrs. Shriver in 1968.

"I thought it was important for SI to recognize Mrs. Shriver while she was still alive," Kelly says. "Here was a woman who changed the way the world looks at special-needs people, and she used sports to make it happen. She'd never really fit the criteria of Sportsman of the Year, but perhaps we should have something similar to the Oscars' Lifetime Achievement Award to honor her and those who transform the lives of others."



Our Best Reflection
Ali, photographed by Neil Leifer in Miami Beach, 1970

Ten years later, on the 40th anniversary of the first Special Olympics, Mrs. Shriver became the first recipient of the SI Legacy Award.

THE FIRST mention of Ali in SI came in our April 4, 1960, issue, in a one-paragraph dispatch about the impressive performance in the national Golden Gloves championships by an 18-year-old named Cassius Clay. In the decades since, through this, his 39th appearance on the cover, Ali has been an essential character—*th*e essential character—in a story SI has always strived to tell: how sports can be used not just for the pursuit of personal glory but also to leave a broader footprint.

"Ali has lived his life as a champion in every possible sense," Cannella says. "Champion in the ring. Champion of his principles. Champion of those in need and those who struggle for equality. There's no greater legacy to celebrate." □

ERICK W. RASCO FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (STONE); NEIL LEIFER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (ALI)

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INBOX

FOR SEPT. 21, 2015



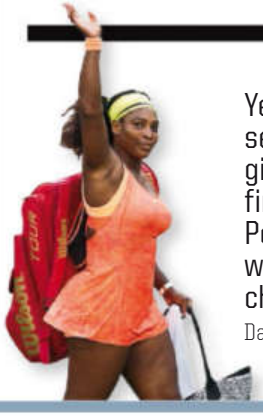


No disrespect to **Moses Malone**, who was an exceptional player, but his numbers are not better than Wilt Chamberlain's. While Malone did have more double double seasons [15], he played 21 years. Chamberlain played only 14 seasons and averaged a double double in every one.

Marvin Chosky, Ravena, N.Y.

Saying Dwight Gooden's exceptional 1985 was "the greatest season since the mound was lowered" overlooks Ron Guidry's remarkable performance in '78. The Yankees' lefthander struck out 248, walked 72 and went 25-3 with a 1.74 ERA in 276⅔ innings—and he had to face a DH.

Ron D'Argenio, Laurys Station, Pa.



Yes, **Serena Williams** had a great season. However, you did not give enough credit to U.S. Open finalists Roberta Vinci and Flavia Pennetta. These Italian women will probably never get another chance to shine so bright.

Daniel Mulvihill, Perkiomenville, Pa.

If you watched last year's NCAA playoff game between Marcus Mariota's Oregon and Jameis Winston's Florida State, you could have seen Mariota's stunning debut coming. He was sharp and quick-footed; Winston was befuddled and stumbled, and he threw a pick.

Bill Galli, Grants Pass, Ore.



COVER



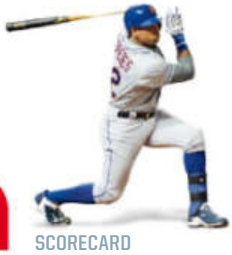
While celebrating Aaron Rodgers, your photo also highlighted the Packers' offensive linemen in charge of protecting him. Their determination comes through perfectly on the cover.

Jeff Grotenhuis
Slinger, Wis.

Before anointing Rodgers as "the NFL's best quarterback," remember Tom Brady ranks near the top of nearly every passing category and has four Super Bowl rings. When Rodgers calls it a career, will his accomplishments surpass Brady's?

Bill Miller
Pomona, Calif.

PAGE 24



SCORECARD

Ask Oakland fans how valuable Yoenis Cespedes is. When the A's traded him to Boston in July 2014 they were 66-41; afterward, they went 22-33 and lost to the Royals in the AL wild-card play-in game.

Gerald Kelley
Fayetteville, N.C.

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Edited by **JIM GORANT** + **TED KEITH**

SCORECARD



Heir Jordan

With his stellar 2015 season, 22-year-old Jordan Spieth has vaulted to the top of the sports world and inherited the mantle of world's best golfer

BY ALAN SHIPNUCK

ON SUNDAY AT the Tour Championship, with history and an ungodly amount of money on the line, Jordan Spieth faced yet another defining moment in a season full of them. His playing partner, Henrik Stenson—who with his buzz cut and bulging muscles is looking more and more like Ivan Drago from *Rocky IV*—had stuffed his tee shot for a sure birdie on the 197-yard par-3 11th hole at East Lake, in Atlanta. Spieth, coming off a bogey on the 10th hole, faced a 48-foot putt with at least six feet of break off a dastardly knob in the green. If he three-putted, he would slip into a tie with Stenson. Naturally, Spieth gutted the birdie putt, and at that moment the tournament was all but over. The look Stenson shot Spieth was classic: a mixture of annoyance, amusement and, yes, awe. Seeing it, I flashed back a decade and a half to Firestone Country Club, a stolen moment when Ernie Els witnessed Tiger Woods gouge a long approach out of six-inch rough, around a tree, to within 12 feet of a seemingly inaccessible pin placement. Els's eyebrows shot up, and he offered a small but perceptible head shake. It was a moment of clarity, like the one Stenson experienced: I'm one of the best players in the world, but this guy is from another planet.

Winning the Tour Championship with a nine-

Future Cast McIlroy and Day will keep Spieth from dominating like Woods did, but they will also help carry the game.

CURTIS COMPTON/TNS/ZUMAPRESS.COM

under 271 pushed Spieth's earnings for the year to a record $12.03 million, not including the $10 million bonus that came with his victory in the seasonlong FedEx Cup race. At 22 he's the youngest player to win five times in a season since Horton Smith, way back in 1929. The four-stroke victory at East Lake helped Spieth clinch the Vardon Trophy for the lowest scoring average on Tour (68.91), and more to the point, it ended any silly talk of Jason Day's stealing player of the year votes. Spieth, by virtue of his 1-1-4-2 finish in the majors, was always going to be the player of the year. The finish at the Tour Championship was merely the exclamation point that this epic season deserves. So how is the relentless Spieth going to celebrate?

"Get better," he said on Sunday evening. "There are places I can get better: Ball-striking-wise, I can get stronger, I can hit it further." Just so you know he isn't utterly detached from reality, he did allow that, "My short game I want to keep consistent, keep exactly where it's at."

Part of Spieth's charm is that he sees golf as a team sport, and he is generous in sharing credit: with caddie Michael Greller, who challenges and engages his man; swing coach Cameron McCormick, who has helped Spieth find the perfect blend of art and science in his approach; trainer Damon Goddard, who has helped transform Spieth from a boy to a man with six or seven grueling workouts a week; agent Jay Danzi, who has done a masterly job of allowing his client to focus on golf while also positioning him to make more money off the course than on it; and, not least, a tight, loving family that keeps him grounded. Earlier this year Spieth bought a big house in his native Dallas, though he allows that it was mostly for tax reasons. His only real splurge has been season tickets for his beloved Cowboys. Asked on Sunday about his new life-changing riches, Spieth said, "I have an opportunity now, with a year like this and a bonus like that, to celebrate and to share it with the people that have made it possible. And that's kind of the plan. Our team did an unbelievable job this year. Everything was exactly how we needed it to be to peak at the right times. If we can continue to do that, then we'll have more seasons like this. But right now, we're going to enjoy it, and I'm able to help out those who made this possible. Because it was not a single effort."

He also could have thanked his buddies Rory McIlroy, Jason Day and Rickie Fowler, who have inspired and pushed him. McIlroy missed a chunk of the season with a left ankle injury, but the latter two of these twentysomethings finished in the top five of the final FedEx Cup standings, along with Stenson, 39, who offered not only the most memorable smirk of the Tour Championship but also the most efficient scouting report. At the end of a year during which Spieth inspired so much hyperbole, Stenson summed him up thusly: "Very tidy player." □

It was a moment of clarity Stenson experienced. **I'm one of the best players in the world,** but this guy is from another planet.

GO FIGURE



3

Interceptions in one stretch of 13 pass attempts for Dolphins QB **Ryan Tannehill** in Sunday's 41–14 loss to Buffalo. Those picks came minutes after Tannehill broke Hall of Famer Dan Marino's team record of 156 consecutive passes without an INT.



17

Straight seasons the **Yankees** have drawn at least 3 million fans, an MLB record. They last failed to reach that mark in 1998, when they won 114 games and drew 2,955,193.

48

Cup series races won by **Tony Stewart**, who announced on Monday that he will retire after 2016. Stewart won the 1997 IRL championship before switching in 1998 to stock car racing, where he won three NASCAR titles.





168

Games it took Bayern Munich's **Robert Lewandowski** to score 100 goals, the fastest in Bundesliga history. He scored five in a nine-minute stretch against Wolfsburg on Sept. 22 and two more in a 3–0 win over Mainz last Saturday, giving him 101 career goals in league play.

MIKE EHRMANN/GETTY IMAGES (TANNEHILL); MATT SULLIVAN/GETTY IMAGES (STEWART); SIMON HOFMANN/BONGARTS/GETTY IMAGES (LEWANDOWSKI)



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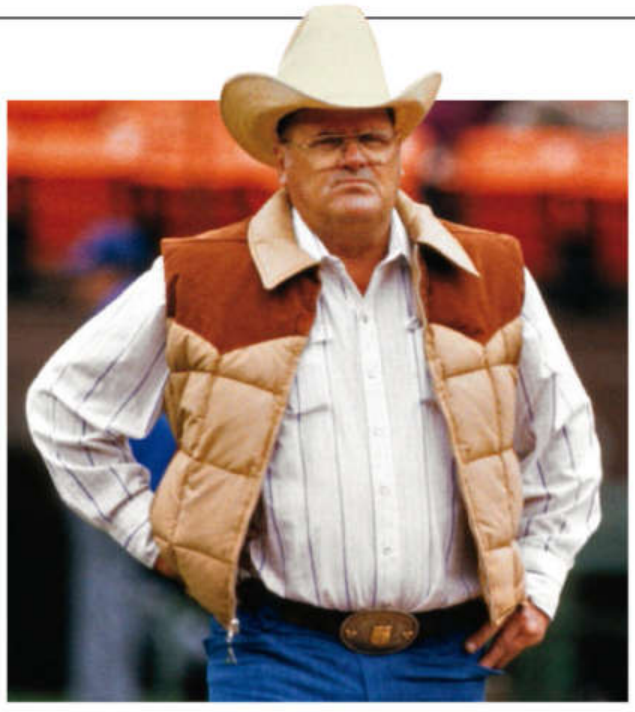
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NFL-OPERA
+
Bum Rush

The fat lady sings about an Oilers icon



LAST THURSDAY the marquee outside the Stafford Centre in suburban Houston advertised *Bum Phillips: All-American Opera*, Sept. 24, followed by *Houston Natural Hair Blowout*, Sept. 27. It's unlikely that Phillips would have had much use for either.

The Oilers coach and Marine vet kept his hair high, tight and usually under a Stetson. As for an opera about his life, "Let's face it, Bum Phillips and opera don't belong in the same sentence," said former Oilers quarterback Dan Pastorini as he introduced the production.

Besides Pastorini, Earl Campbell was there, as were former Oilers Billy Johnson, Ken Burrough, Robert Brazile and plenty more. Patrons paid up to $500 to see the performance, which raised money for Bum Phillips Charities. The evening wasn't black tie, but Johnson's white shoes carried a high shine and those in Campbell jerseys did respectfully tuck them into their khakis.

The Pastorini-meets-Pagliacci production was the creation of Luke Leonard, a native Texan. It had a three-week run in New York City in 2014, months after Phillips died at age 90. Pastorini saw it with Phillips's son, Wade, and after both men left the production with tears streaming down their faces, Pastorini decided he had to bring it to Houston.

Football might seem an odd subject for an opera, but not in the Lone Star State. As one character—a female, no less—sang, "Hell, in Texas we eat a football for breakfast and s--- a field goal for lunch." Like most operas, this one was heavy on violence and men whose actions are driven by their nether regions. The story hinges on the 1979 season, when the Oilers lost Pastorini, Campbell and Burrough to groin injuries in the same wild-card game and still made the AFC title game, allowing Pastorini's character to sing the memorable line, "My groin!"

An alternately touching moment was an aria sung by the character of Debbie, Phillips's second wife, who reminds him where his home truly is. Debbie herself was in the crowd, moved by what she was watching, as were the Luv Ya Blue–era players. Traditional? No. But as Leonard said, "We make art about gods of our times." In Houston, that's Bum.

—Mark Bechtel



BOOKS
TWEETABLE REVIEWS

Expect a Miracle
Jenny Long with Bob Der
A seven-year-old hauls his five-year-old brother with cerebral palsy through a triathlon. Told by their single mom. *#kleenex*

From the Buckeyes to the Bronx
Rick Bay
Retired front-office big wig's self-published tome is stuffed with inside stories—can be self-serving but never dull. *#theboss*

Striking Gridiron
Greg Nichols
Western Pa. high schoolers chase a wins record while carrying the hopes of striking steel workers. Small-town America brought to life. *#1959*

Patrick Roy
Michel Roy
Chapter and verse on the hockey icon, written by his dad and translated from French. It's a little stiff but comprehensive. *#butterfly*

GEORGE ROSE/GETTY IMAGES (PHILLIPS)

ALL-NEW

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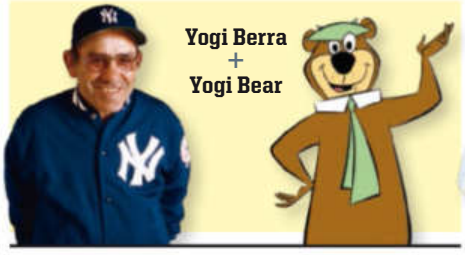


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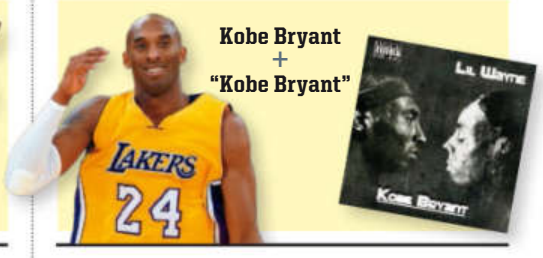
EXTRA MUSTARD

Imitation Game

Yogi Berra had the coolest nonhuman namesake among athletes, but not the only one



The story that Berra sued Hanna-Barbera was buried by Allen Barra's book *Yogi Berra: Eternal Yankee*. Got that?



This song on Lil Wayne's 2009 Tear Drop Tune 2 is not only named after the Lakers' star, it's a tribute to him.



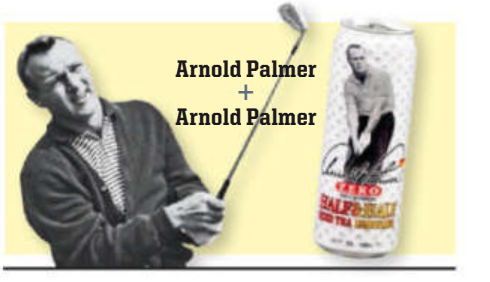
This not-yet-built crossing will connect Detroit to Canada, much like Mr. Hockey did.



Like the Bruins' goalie, this species of wasp wears black and yellow, and the females have glovelike grabbers on their front legs.



The maker claimed the candy bar was named after Grover Cleveland's daughter, who'd been dead for 17 years when it came out in 1921.



The golfer was overheard ordering the half iced tea–half lemonade concoction, and it became known for him.

THEY SAID IT



"LUCKILY, THAT AMOUNT OF MONEY DOESN'T SORT OF MEAN MUCH TO ME ANYMORE."

Rory McIlroy

World No. 3 golfer discussing the $10 million he would get for winning the FedEx Cup. He finished 15th in the Cup standings.



SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

Tottenham Hotspur honored Wayne Gretzky on Sept. 23 by giving him a jersey for **someone named Gretsky.**

The Pats
They're 3-0 after a 51-17 thrashing of Jacksonville. They're winning in a way that leaves opponents totally deflated.



HOT ▲

NOT ▼



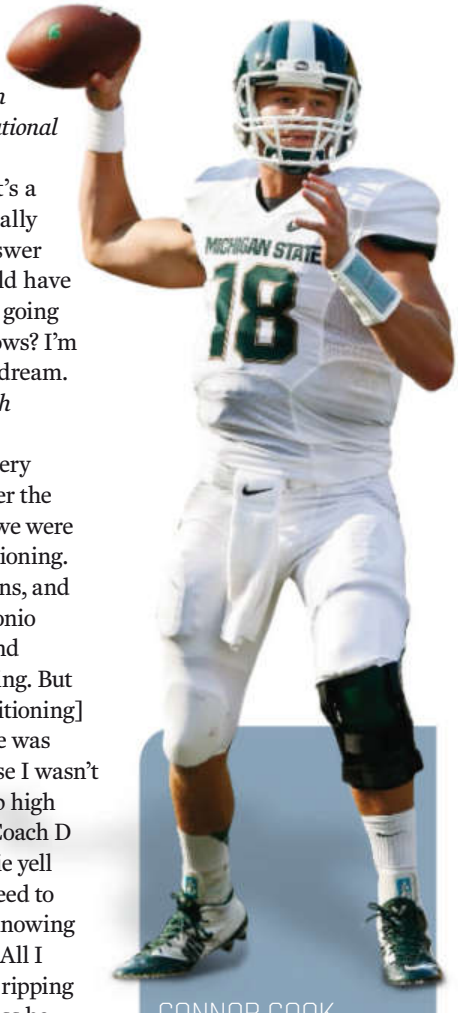
The Nats
Jonathan Papelbon grabbed Bryce Harper by the throat, giving the team another way to choke.

WALTER IOOSS JR. FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (BERRA); HANNA-BARBERA/EVERETT COLLECTION (YOGI BEAR); MARK J. TERRILL/AP (BRYANT); HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES (HOWE); KIRK IRWIN/LIAISON/GETTY IMAGES (TRASH); TWITTER.COM (WASP); GREGORY SHAMUS/GETTY IMAGES (PALMER); PATRICK SMITH/GETTY IMAGES (MCILROY); JIM ROGASH/GETTY IMAGES (BRADY); TONY QUINN/ICON SPORTSWIRE/AP (PAPELBON)



JUST MY TYPE

→ *Interview by* **DAN PATRICK**



CONNOR COOK

SPARTAN EXISTENCE

The Heisman hopeful and senior at No. 2 Michigan State won't say who the best quarterback is in the Big Ten, but he has lofty goals for the season. Any doubt, just check his fridge.

DAN PATRICK: *Would you have gone pro if Michigan State had won the national title last season?*

CONNOR COOK: That's a good question. I really don't know the answer to that. There would have been some thought going into it. But who knows? I'm still here living the dream.

DP: *Last time a coach yelled at you?*

CC: I get yelled at every once in a while. After the Rose Bowl in 2014 we were doing winter conditioning. We're doing wall runs, and coach [Mark] Dantonio was on his phone and wasn't really watching. But [strength-and-conditioning] coach [Ken] Mannie was yelling at me because I wasn't getting my knees up high enough. And then Coach D heard Coach Mannie yell at me and felt the need to yell at me without knowing what was going on. All I heard was Coach D ripping me a new one. I guess he thought the Rose Bowl [a 24–20 win over Stanford] made me think that I didn't have to work hard enough.

DP: *Have you ever yelled at Coach Dantonio?*

CC: Heck, no. Are you kidding me? Everyone on this football team knows not to do that.

DP: *Does Dantonio ever smile?*

CC: All the time. You've never seen him smile?

DP: *Not that I remember.*

CC: He's smiled plenty of times. Back when he first got here [in 2007], he never smiled. But then he started to win, and he's smiled more and more.

DP: *Did he charm you when he recruited you?*

CC: Yeah. Coach D is a great guy. The only time people see him is on game day. That's his game face. When he's not on the field, Coach D is a great family man, super kind, always thinking of others. No one knows that because they only see him on game day.

DP: *Who is the best quarterback in the Big Ten?*

CC: I'm not gonna say that, but I know the answer.

DP: *I want you to be confident.*

CC: I am confident. I just don't feel the need to say something like that. I'll keep it to myself.

DP: *What's in your refrigerator right now?*

CC: We've got a chicken breast in here and some salsa. Green Mountain Gringo, it's called. We've got some lettuce, carrots and cucumbers because I like to make salads every night. A lot of sauces.

DP: *No beer, right?*

CC: No beer.

DP: *That's pretty respectable.*

CC: What did you expect, all beer?

DP: *Yeah.*

CC: Just because we're college kids? C'mon.

DP: *All I had was beer in my fridge in college.*

CC: We have some goals to accomplish this year. We can't do that by drinking beer. □

GUEST SHOTS
SAY WHAT?



Rob Manfred, the MLB commissioner, told me he doesn't know how he would vote if Pete Rose were eligible for the Hall of Fame: "I would have to really think hard about the overall experience that Pete had with baseball. I've just never done that." . . . ESPN's



Rick Sutcliffe claimed he saw the Cubs' success this season coming. "This team might be surprising a lot of the fans," Sutcliffe said, "but I don't think they've done anything they didn't expect to do, because of their drafts. This is no different from what [GM] Theo [Epstein] did in Boston." . . . I joked with Falcons



QB **Matt Ryan** that even *I* could throw a touchdown to receiver Julio Jones. "I think you could," Ryan said. "I don't take it as a slight—he's that good. Surrounding yourself with great players is a good thing."

MICHAEL J. LEBRECHT II FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (PATRICK); JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES (COOK); MIKE STOBE/NHLI/GETTY IMAGES (MANFRED); JOE FARAONI/ESPN IMAGES (SUTCLIFFE); MOSES ROBINSON/GETTY IMAGES FOR DAVID YURMAN (RYAN)

The Case for . . .

Three-on-Three Overtime

BY SARAH BARSHOP



THE NHL has seen four-on-four overtime and decided to take it up a notch—or down a notch, depending on one's point of view. After playing 10 seasons with a five-minute, eight-skater sudden-death overtime period (followed by a shootout if the game remained tied), the league has yanked one skater per side. Overtime will now be a three-on-three free-for-all.

The goal is more goals, and therefore fewer regular-season games decided by the shootout. Last season 55.5% (170 of 306) of games that went to OT ended up in an exchange of manufactured breakaways, numbers that roughly align with the league average since 2005. According to commissioner Gary Bettman, market research shows that fans love the shootout, and many probably do. But is it really a good idea to have a meaningful game decided by an All-Star Game Skills Competition event?

Imagine if the NBA decided that after one overtime period teams should have a free throw contest. Or if Major League Baseball went to a home run derby after 12 innings. Shootouts are entertaining to watch, but aren't necessarily indicative of which team deserves to win a game.

With this in mind, the NHL's Board of Governors voted in June to make a change that will open the ice and leave vast spaces where players can operate. The AHL, the NHL's top-level minor league, proved that the concept works last season when it tried a variation of the format: Teams began a seven-minute overtime at four-on-four and went to three-on-three at the first whistle after the three-minute mark. At the end of the season, 201 of 268, or 75.0%, of OT games had been decided during the extra period—more than double the percentage from the previous season, when only 35.3% games ended before a shootout.

The impact could be even greater in the NHL, which boasts faster, more highly skilled players who will have the opportunity to be more creative offensively. Some teams will no doubt choose to play it safe with a forward and two defensemen, but most will likely opt for a more conventional two forwards and one defenseman—imagine the Kings rolling a line of Drew Doughty, Marian Gaborik and Anze Kopitar. Some coaches may even go all out and put three forwards on the ice together—the Blues and the Bruins have already indicated that they'll give it a try. (In the event of a penalty, teams will skate four-on-three, so that teams will never have fewer than three position players on the ice.) Strategic choices will multiply, and line matching may become impossible. Line changes will be even more deliberate because one sloppy exchange could end the game.

Imagine if the NBA concluded that teams should have **a free throw contest to figure out who gets the W.** Or if MLB went to a home run derby.

Goalies may be the most affected by the new format, as they face the possibility of five minutes of end-to-end rushes. Having a netminder who stays focused will be important, but having one who stickhandles effectively will be even better, since one good breakout pass can turn a nice save at one end into a breakaway in the other direction.

In the four-on-four era teams seemed content to escape overtime, already having earned a point simply for making it there. The so-called "loser point" was supposed to be an incentive for teams to go for it in OT, but instead, teams played it safe in order to reach the shootout. Three-point games inflated the totals in the standings, muddying the waters of the playoff race (see the 2013–14 Stanley Cup champion Kings missing the playoffs last season by two points after going 2–8 in shootouts). The "numerous" fans that love the shootout may be disappointed at the outset, but after watching the quick pace and end-to-end action of three-on-three hockey, they will no doubt grow to like the alternative even better. □

VICTOR DECOLONGON/GETTY IMAGES (GABORIK); JUAN OCAMPO/NHLI/GETTY IMAGES (KOPITAR); ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN/NHLI/GETTY IMAGES (DOUGHTY)



Don Pellmann | *Santa Clara, Calif.* | *Track and Field*

Pellmann, 100, set five world age-group records at the San Diego Senior Olympics. He smashed the age 100-and-over marks in the 100 meters (26.99), shot put (21' 6¼") and discus (48' 9"). Pellmann also set world records by becoming the first centenarian to make successful attempts in the high jump (2' 11½") and the long jump (5' 10").



Michelle Xiao | *Omaha* | *Soccer*

Xiao, a freshman midfielder at Stanford, scored to lead the Cardinal to a second straight overtime win, 1–0 over UC Davis. Nebraska's Gatorade player of the year, she had 26 goals and 11 assists for Westside High as a senior and led her club team to the 2015 U.S. Youth Soccer title. Xiao, a member of the U.S. U-19 team, leads Stanford with three goals.



Leonard Snell | *Nashville, Ark.* | *Football*

Leonard, a senior quarterback at Nashville High, completed 8 of 20 passes for 209 yards and one touchdown and ran for 362 yards and six scores on 32 carries to lead the Scrappers to a 69–48 win over Watson Chapel High. His 571 yards of total offense broke an 80-year-old school record. Leonard was averaging 195.5 yards rushing through Sunday.

FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited by **ALEXANDRA FENWICK**



Marina Ramos | *Guaynabo, Puerto Rico* | *Volleyball*

Ramos, a sophomore outside hitter at Division III Clark University (Worcester, Mass.), had double figures in kills and digs in 3–0 wins over Smith and the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, helping to extend the Cougars' start to 10–0. The reigning NEWMAC rookie of the year, Ramos was second in the league in kills per set (4.18) at week's end.



David Cooper | *Alexandria, Va.* | *Football*

David, a senior kicker at Bishop Ireton High, hit a school-record 53-yard field goal in a 62–29 win over St. Albans to top his previous record; a week earlier he buried a 51-yarder with 54 seconds left to lift the Cardinals to a 23–21 win over Bishop O'Connell. Through Sunday he had made 7 of 8 field goals and all 13 extra points.



Lexi York | *Milwaukie, Ore.* | *Racquetball*

York, a freshman at Oregon State, won the Junior Olympic national 18-and-under girls' title in Stockton, Calif., beating Brittany Click of Huffman, Texas, 15–10, 15–7. Last February, as a senior at La Salle Catholic College Prep, York won the national high school girls' singles title in St. Louis, defeating Erika Manilla of Centennial, Colo., 15–9, 15–10.



CROSS-COUNTRY

Gopher Great

LAST WEEKEND was the first time Roy Griak didn't see the gun go off at his namesake meet. The 30th annual Roy Griak Invitational, one of the largest college and high school cross-country events in the nation, is hosted each year by his alma mater, Minnesota. Griak, who died in July at age 91, became the men's track and field and cross-country coach there in 1963 and held the post for 33 years—producing three Big Ten titles and three national champions. At this year's meet, Boise State took the D-I women's title while Michigan State won the men's, and Griak was one-eighth of the inaugural class in the meet's own hall of fame. Said former Gopher and Olympian Garry Bjorklund, "Roy Griak is an ordinary man who did extraordinary things."

—A.F.

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA ATHLETICS (GRIAK); CHRIS STONE/TIMESOFSANDIEGO.COM (PELLMANN); SHIRLEY PEFLEY/STANFORD PHOTO (XIAO); SOUTHWEST ARKANSAS RADIO (SNELL); CLARK UNIVERSITY ATHLETIC COMMUNICATIONS (RAMOS); KEVIN COOPER (COOPER); KEN FIFE (YORK)

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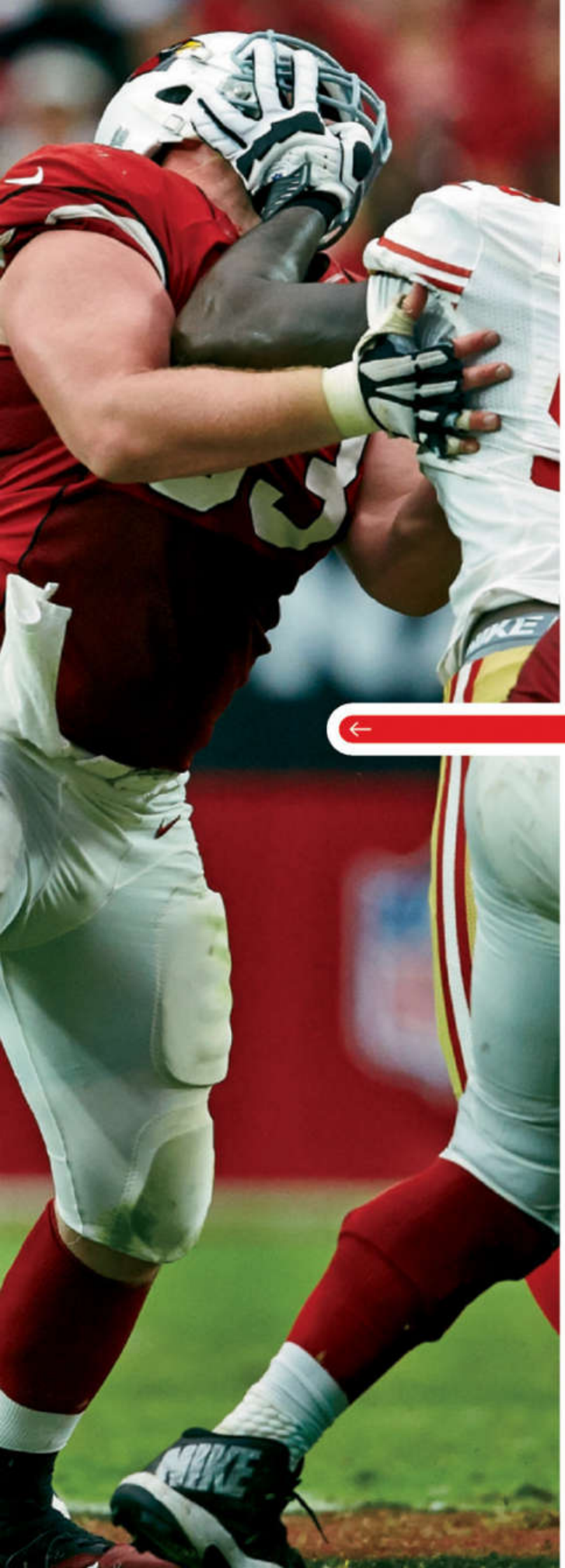
To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, go to **SI.com/faces**.
For more on outstanding amateur athletes, follow **@SI_Faces** on Twitter.



A series from the editors of Sports Illustrated AND WebMD

THE 50 MILLION DOLLAR MAN

PALMER, SUNDAY
Bulky brace and all, the Cardinals' rehabbed QB has Arizona averaging an NFL-high 42 points per game. That would be a team record if it holds up.



HE COULDN'T HAVE KNOWN IT LAST FALL, BUT THE SECOND SEASON-ENDING ACL TEAR FOR CARDINALS QUARTERBACK

CARSON PALMER

WOULD ALSO BE THE FIRST STEP IN BUILDING A BETTER, STRONGER, FASTER PLAYER

BY AUSTIN MURPHY

Photograph by
Mark J. Rebilas for Sports Illustrated

TO BORROW loosely from Neil Armstrong, it was one small step for a man. After taking a shotgun snap in the first quarter of the Cardinals' season opener on Sept. 13, Carson Palmer moved his weight to his back (right) foot, poised to throw. Finding no open receivers, he shifted the weight to his front (left) foot before *pushing off* that foot, rolling out to his right, scanning the field, buying time—three, four, five seconds—and finally rifling a 10-yard touchdown pass to his sometime houseguest and babysitter, second-year receiver John (Smokey) Brown.

That play was significant on several levels. It staked the Cardinals to an early lead in what would be a 31–19 victory over the Saints. It capped Palmer's first regular-season drive in the 308 days since last Nov. 9, when he tore his left ACL against the Rams. And it provided further proof of what his Arizona teammates had observed in the preseason: that the 35-year-old quarterback has not just returned to his former level of excellence—Palmer had won 13 of his previous 15 starts—but transcended it. Following the Cardinals' third straight victory to open this season, a 47–7 demolition of the 49ers on Sunday, Palmer's nine touchdown passes (against just two interceptions) were tied for the NFL lead, and his 117.8 passer rating was fourth best among full-time starters.

That push-off, incidentally, was almost identical to the

ungainly rocker step—shifting his weight back, forward, then back again—that felled Palmer last season. "Now that I think about it," Palmer said earlier this month, "that's exactly what I did last time, when the ACL failed. But this is the first time I've thought about it."

That's a good thing, considering the flashbacks that plagued the QB during his *first* comeback from left-ACL surgery. That operation, far more extensive, was necessitated in January 2006 after the second offensive snap of the Bengals' first playoff game in 15 years. A borderline cheap shot by 300-pound Steelers tackle Kimo von Oelhoffen caved in the knee, tearing most of its connective tissue and dislocating the kneecap. Rating the seriousness of that injury "on a scale of one to three," said the surgeon who operated on Palmer, "this is a four."

"It took me a full year, plus another six, seven games into the next season, to really feel comfortable again and not see ghosts," recalls Palmer. "There would be times when I'd drop back and I'd see color flash, and I'd pull my leg back or not step into a throw because the memory was fresh.

"This time, with this injury, I haven't seen any ghosts."

Here's what he *is* seeing, more clearly than at any time in his 12-year career: the field, the intentions of opposing defensive coordinators and a path to the postseason. Palmer was 33 after his 2012 campaign and, having just completed two miserable seasons in Oakland (where he was 8–16), widely believed to be in the deep twilight of his career. Jettisoned by Raiders brass in a deal involving late-round draft picks, he arrived in Arizona with new coach Bruce Arians, the quarterback whisperer who has mentored Peyton Manning, Ben Roethlisberger and Andrew Luck, and who recently said of Palmer, "He's playing [at] as high a level right now as anybody I've ever coached."

BETWEEN BEING picked No. 1 in the 2003 draft out of USC and joining the Cardinals, Palmer spent a mostly Sisyphean decade in the NFL. And while the mediocrity of his surrounding casts with the Bengals and the Raiders never could dim his reputation as an elite quarterback, his learning curve under Arians that first season was steep. The coach known as BA runs a complex, field-stretching, opportunistic attack that demands both a formidable football intellect and a high level of trust in the system. Palmer had plenty of the former but not enough of the latter.

By the middle of last season, though, his grasp was much surer. "He trusts everybody," Arians revealed last November. "Instead of seeing guys come open, *then* throwing, he's throwing 'em open. Guys turn their head—the ball's there."

Then, five days later—just two days after Palmer signed a three-year, $50 million extension—his season was over. But even as he put his body through intensive rehab, Palmer kept his head in the game, says Arians, "watching film and learning more of our offense." In July, as he has almost every season he's been in the league, Palmer invited his receivers to Camp Carson, a postminicamp, pre-training-camp week of route-running and

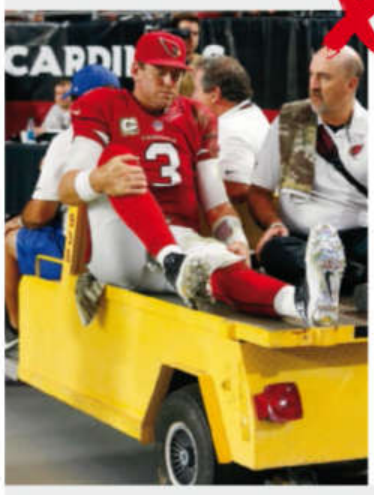


JAN. 8, 2006

ACL TEAR NO. 1 *Palmer's playoff debut, in Cincinnati, was two snaps old when Von Oelhoffen came in late and low. Afterward, in rehab that included submerged treadmill work, Palmer told SI, "The Super Bowl could have been ours. I felt like I had deserted [my team]."*



FROM LEFT: ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES; SIMON BRUTY FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED



NOV. 9, 2014

ACL TEAR NO. 2

Carted off again, just when things were jelling for the 7–1 Cardinals, Palmer leaned on his previous experience during his rehab. There are certain weeks in therapy, he says, "that are just gruesome." Having gone through it before, he adds, "I could mentally prepare myself for those."



drill work at a high school near his home, north of San Diego.

"We lifted weights, worked out, went over hot reads," says Brown, who crashed in a guest room at Palmer's house. "Mostly, he's giving me the heads-up on how to adjust more quickly, play faster."

Palmer's hospitality was motivated at least a little by self-interest: "Having [Brown] around is great because, when I come home tired from a workout, my kids don't come running up to me to see if I want to play—they go straight to Smokey, who's just run 480 routes. I get to sit on the couch, and he'll run around with them, swim, play basketball. He's got a three-year-old daughter of his own, and he's phenomenal with kids."

While Brown, the pride of Division II Pittsburg (Kans.) State, is Arizona's most potent vertical threat, Palmer's go-to target remains the redoubtable Larry Fitzgerald, who's hauled in 17 catches for 246 yards and five touchdowns in Arizona's last two games, marking the 32-year-old's best two-week stretch since Arians informed him two seasons ago that he'd be moving inside to the more hard-scrabble neighborhood of the slot.

"I feel it building every week," Palmer says of his understanding of Arians's scheme. "I feel very comfortable, but I don't feel at all like I've *got it*. And I want to keep that feeling, because that's what keeps me up late and gets me back in the building early Monday mornings and Tuesdays [the players' day off]. But I'm extremely confident in what I'm doing and in the guys around me, throwing balls before they're breaking, feeling holes open and delivering the ball off of feel."

Clearly, he is delivering it with more zip—when the occasion merits—and accuracy than before his latest ACL tear. In and out of the pocket he's moving more spryly than he has in a long time, leading Arians to estimate that his quarterback, postrehab, seems "five years younger." (The subject of his deceptive speed is one Palmer prefers to keep on the down-low. "People think I'm slow," he says. "They don't take good angles, and I'm able to scramble around, make plays every once in a while.")

This much we know: He has come a remarkably long way since he crumpled, untouched, to the turf a little less than 11 months ago. Impassive under his ball cap as he was carted off the field, Palmer waited until he got home before allowing himself a good cry.

WHAT PROVOKED those tears? Sadness? Frustration? Rage at the universe for the Unfairness of It All?

Certainly not the last, says Palmer. "I've never asked, *Why me?* I have so many things to be grateful for."

The catharsis came with the full realization that his 2014 season—so pregnant with promise during Arizona's 7–1 start—was over. "I gave myself that night just to not be Dad or the quarterback or the captain, to just let my emotions go so I could move on to the next stage: the surgery, the rehab and the recovery."

Silver lining number 1: Palmer had the playbook from the *first* time he'd blown out his left knee and was thankful to have that experience to fall back on. He could brace himself, he says, for those unpleasant days when "they hold your leg and snap down your knee to get the scar tissue out," could gird himself against the monotony of the three weeks of box work, a gantlet of 25 workouts "where you're stepping up on boxes and it's *so* boring. And tedious. And long. And annoying."

Silver lining number 2: As long as he was going to "relearn those motor patterns," in the parlance of his Carlsbad, Calif.–based trainer and speed coach, Ryan

FROM LEFT: RICK SCUTERI/AP; MATT YORK/AP

Flaherty, Palmer decided to use the opportunity to tweak and improve his mechanics too. This retooling took place under the guidance of Flaherty, Cardinals physical therapist Brett Fischer and strength coach Buddy Morris, and Jordan Palmer, Carson's 31-year-old brother, who was his backup for three seasons in Cincinnati. And while that crew did not include one Oscar Goldman, who intones at the beginning of *The Six Million Dollar Man*, "We can rebuild him; we have the technology," Palmer's retinue did help its $50 million man come back better, stronger, faster.

"When Carson first got to me," recalls Flaherty, who began working with the QB early last January, roughly six weeks after the surgery, "his lower-body strength-to-weight ratio was around 1.7 times his body weight. Ideally, for an NFL quarterback, you want to be about 2.5."

Palmer increased that strength by performing, among other exercises, deadlifts with a six-sided bar. He endured single-leg balance and stabilization exercises (squats, etc.) to build strength "from the feet up," says Flaherty, and isolated "those little stabilizer muscles" around the knee joint—particularly the VMO, or vastus medialis oblique, just above and inside the kneecap. On the field he suffered through countless sprints and change-of-direction drills. And at some point rehab became rejuvenation. Between the weight work and the speed work, says Flaherty, "[Carson] is stronger and faster than he's been in the last eight to 10 years."

He's also more efficient, which is where Palmer's kid brother comes in. Throughout his own seven-year professional career Jordan, now a free agent, has moonlighted as a quarterback coach. And by studying Carson's videotaped workouts this off-season, he noticed that "as [Carson] went through his progressions, his feet got a little wide, he sank back on his back leg, and he had a little bit of an overstride."

Overstriding, as Jordan can tell you, is a gateway flaw. "When you overstride," he explains, "your back hip doesn't fire enough," which can result in the dropping of one's throwing elbow, which leads to overcompensating by "coming way more over your front foot," at which point "the ball's not going to feel right in your hand, it starts to get funky, and guys try to fix it at the last second." All of that can cause scattershot throws, damaged confidence, the waiver wire.

Palmer's crew tailored their drills to prevent Carson from, in his words, "taking such big steps, getting my foot so far off the ground." By standing taller in the pocket—and at the same time taking shorter, quicker steps—he's now better able to see the field and react to what he sees. "It's not that you stopped on a dime or hurdled somebody or did a backflip," Jordan told his big brother after that win over the Saints. "You just looked *really* confident in your ability to extend the play."

SI.COM

For more on Palmer's recovery, including video that takes you inside the training room and onto the practice field, go to **SI.com/thecomeback**



BROWN-NOSER *After a summer at Camp Carson, Brown (far left) caught Palmer's first postrehab TD, and he added 62 yards against the 49ers on Sunday.*

CAN THIS new and improved Carson Palmer extend the Cardinals' season, though? Early portents are favorable, especially in the NFC West. With two losses already, the Seahawks seem to have come down in the world. Reports of a resurgence by the Rams appear to have been at least slightly exaggerated. And the 49ers are in free fall.

The postseason, should Arizona return to it, will provide unfamiliar surroundings for Palmer. He threw one pass in that catastrophic cameo against the Steelers, a 66-yarder to the late Chris Henry—the same play on which Von Oelhoffen came in late and low. And five years ago with Cincinnati he was outplayed in the wild-card round by fellow USC alum and then Jets rookie Mark Sanchez (his short-lived Gotham tabloid nickname in those heady weeks: The Sanchise!) in a 24–14 loss. Palmer hasn't taken a postseason snap since. He was looking on helplessly last January, during the Cardinals' 27–16 wild-card loss to the Panthers, as emergency starter Ryan Lindley led Arizona to 78 yards of offense, the lowest total in NFL playoff history.

What if Palmer fizzles under January's brighter lights? What will it mean in the grand scheme? He's accomplished plenty, winning the 2002 Heisman Trophy, playing in two Pro Bowls, claiming the NFL's Ed Block Courage Award for his comeback from that first, grisly knee injury. He has earned the respect of the people who matter to him. Shouldn't that be enough? Or will there be a hole in his résumé if he fails to lead this team deep into the postseason?

Palmer's answer: a definitive *yes*. "Because at the end of every season, it doesn't matter if you went 15–1 and lost in the first round. All that matters is what happens when it starts getting really cold. That's what I'm playing for."

The outlook is bright. "This is the best opportunity I've had," Palmer says. "It's the most exciting time of my career. It's the most fun I've had playing the game. It's the most free I've felt."

It helps when you're not seeing ghosts. □

MARK J. REBILAS FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

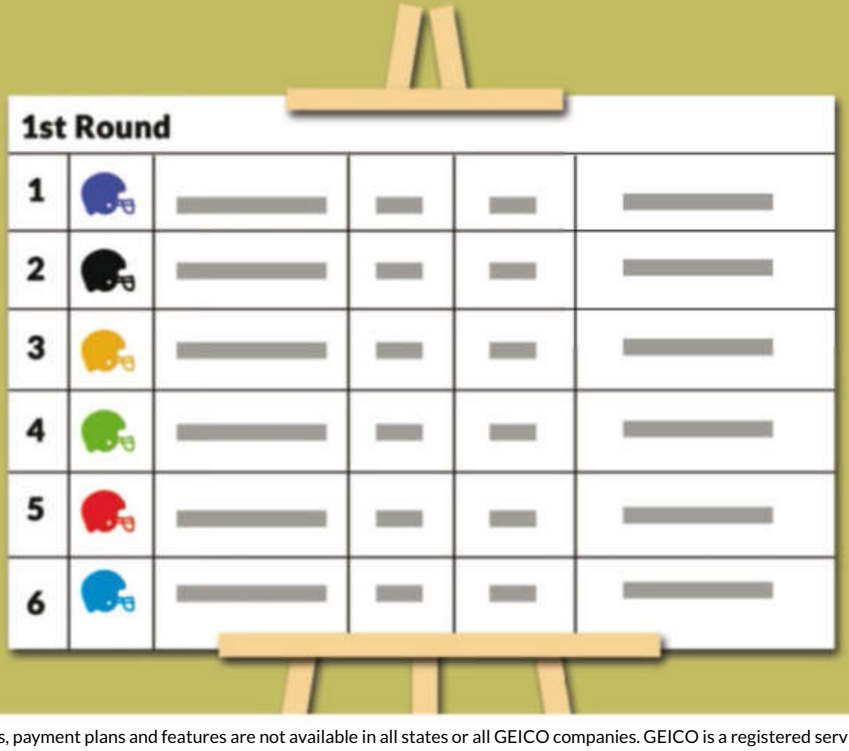
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BASEBALL

SEAS FOR THE

AT 22, **BRYCE HARPER** IS RUNNING AWAY WITH AN MVP—AND PRODUCING BASEBALL IMMORTALS DID IN THEIR YOUTH. THE QUESTION NOW: WHAT

HISTORICAL GREATNESS incubates daily under fluorescent lights. Every smashing game that brings Bryce Harper nearer to baseball's immortals begins here, in an indoor batting cage. To the disappointment of souvenir hunters and home run ornithologists who love a good, long flight, Harper has not taken batting practice on the field all year.

"I hit here and stick with my routine," he said last week in the cage behind the Nationals' dugout. "I started it just this year. That way I can just worry about getting through the baseball and not worry about where it's going."

Harper begins by hitting off a tee, first only with his top hand, then only with his bottom hand, and then, to feel his rhythm through the ball, *Happy Gilmore* style, in which he sets up two paces behind the tee and swings as he walks up to it, recalling Adam Sandler's eponymous golfer. Next, from behind a screen, Ali Modami, a Nationals batting practice pitcher, flips him baseballs to hit. Finally, Modami, who is lefthanded, throws him BP, often calling out a situation Harper may face that night.

"Runner on first, one out, eighth inning, [Brian] Matusz. . . ."

It is always Modami who throws to him. Harper knows he rarely will face a righthanded pitcher with the game on the line. He wants to make routine the difficult angle created when a lefty releases the ball to a lefthanded hitter. "I haven't taken BP from a righty since spring training," Harper says.

The routine never varies. The thwack of the bat on the baseball and the violent repetition of such labor evoke the pounding of a roofer hammering galvanized steel nails. But when his cage work is complete, Harper is not quite ready. There is one more piece of business.

Walk into any major league clubhouse an hour or two before a game and you might feel as if you stumbled into a college study lab. Players hunch over laptops or tablets to watch video of opposing pitchers. Television monitors run a continuous loop of game footage of that night's opposing starter. Color-coded printouts are available with breakdowns of opposing pitchers' pitches and patterns.

Harper wants none of it. He asks just one question of Rick Schu, Washington's hitting coach: "Does he have good control or bad control?"

"That's all he wants—well, that and velocity," Schu says. "We have some guys, like Jayson Werth, who want as much as you can give them. Not Bryce."

With that, the wrecking ball is properly prepared for demolition. At 22, Harper has put together such a historically monstrous season that the question is not whether he will be the National League Most Valuable Player, but whether he will become the youngest unanimous MVP ever.

Harper virtually has locked up the crowns for home runs (41) and batting average (.336), a double honor only two hitters as young as Harper have accomplished: Ty Cobb in 1909 and Ted Williams in '41. He also likely will win the "slash" Triple Crown (leading the league in batting average, on-base percentage and slugging percentage), which has been achieved by a hitter so young only three times: Cobb, Williams and Stan Musial ('43).

Even disregarding his youthfulness, Harper has been extraordinary because of how much better he has been than every other hitter in baseball. As measured by adjusted OPS, which takes into account league and park factors, the gap between Harper (201) and the next best hitter, Joey Votto (177), is the greatest in the majors since 2004, when Barry Bonds (263) blew away Albert Pujols (173) and the rest of the field. Bonds also won the majors' slash Triple Crown that year.

Long dead, cryogenically frozen or chemically enhanced, the closest



SON

AGES

BY TOM VERDUCCI
Photograph by
Patrick Smith/Getty Images

AS ONLY A HANDFUL OF
WILL HIS PRIME LOOK LIKE?



CONTROL FREAK
Harper typically asks just one question about an opposing pitcher: Does he have good command?

comparables to what Harper has done this season are not of these times. And to think, Harper began this season as a .272 hitter better known for his indiscrimination, be it with his ferocious hacks or injurious defense and baserunning. "He's like a completely different hitter," says teammate Reed Johnson. "It's so impressive what he's done. Lots of guys work on improving their plate discipline, but I've never seen anything like this."

ONE DAY in mid-August, while the Nationals were in San Francisco, Harper was walking past the tiny AT&T Park office of manager Matt Williams when a man in the room called out to him.

"Hey, come in here! Come talk to me!"

It was the first time Harper had met Bonds, the only other man in the past 14 years to have an adjusted OPS better than 200. One memory Harper has of Bonds remains particularly clear. Harper had just turned 10 when Bonds came to the plate against Angels closer Troy Percival in the ninth inning of Game 2 of the 2002 World Series. Bonds had seen 15 pitches that night and looked at 13 of them; a dozen were outside the strike zone. The 16th pitch was yet another ball. And then Percival threw a fastball over the plate.

"Throwing a billion miles an hour," Harper says. "And he hits it nine miles to right. Barry was the best of all time with the eye and staying within himself."

At that first meeting the two hitters talked about *not* hitting. "He told me he had the confidence in the guys behind him, so he could take those pitches," Harper says. "He said, 'I knew I would see half a pitch an at bat, and that's what it was going to be. I knew the guy behind me would do the damage, I'd score and we'd win the ball game.' That really hit me, because it's true if I can take my walk and get on base, I did my job."

Indeed, Harper's league-leading OBP this season has also translated to an NL-best 117 runs scored. Until this year, patience rarely had been associated with Harper, especially from his detractors, who believed his game didn't match the hype around him. They saw more attitude than production. On Sunday, Nationals closer Jonathan Papelbon, a teammate for only two months, renewed the disparagers' criticism with the most public and ugliest attack yet. From a top-step perch even before Harper reached the dugout, Papelbon rebuked Harper for not running hard on a fly out. Harper, after descending the stairs, shouted back at Papelbon, who suddenly grabbed Harper's throat with his left hand and shoved him into the back of the dugout, where teammates quickly separated them. Papelbon apologized after the game, while a dismissive Harper said, "I don't really care—it's like brothers fighting."

Papelbon has had his own issues with teammates, saying recently that he was "one of the few who actually wanted to win" while with the Phillies. The scuffle dredged up past criticism of Harper, whether for being benched by Williams last year for a lack of hustle or cracking wise in spring training this year after the team's addition of free-agent pitcher Max Scherzer, "Where's my ring?"

"I didn't see that punk kid," says Washington GM Mike Rizzo. "I saw a player that had a love for the game, was gregarious, had a huge personality and wasn't going to be held down by the media."

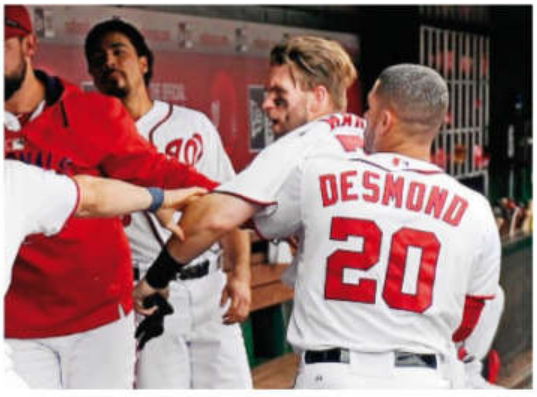
This season, Harper's fourth, is his first uninterrupted one. As a teenage rookie in 2012 he spent all but two games in April in the minors. In both '13 and '14 he suffered injuries in April that caused him to miss chunks of time or to play hurt—first with left-knee and -hip injuries caused by collisions with outfield walls, then a torn left-thumb ligament suffered on a headfirst slide.

"I remember seeing where guys would say he's an overrated player, that he'd never reach his potential," Rizzo says. "Wait a minute. He was a historic player at 19. He was a historic player at 20, 21—and he was never healthy in any of those seasons. He hit 22 home runs when he was 19—and if that's not a terrific start to a career I don't know what is.

"I'll tell you this: I've never seen a young player, at age 19, who from day one was pitched like he was Barry Bonds or Babe Ruth. He saw the least amount of fastballs in his first years in the league. Now he sees the least amount of balls in the zone."

Harper does see the fewest strikes as a percentage of total pitches, and he has cut the percentage of times he swings at pitches out of the zone from 35.7 last year to 27.9 this year.

What makes Harper so dangerous is his Bondsian knack for pouncing on the one time a skittish pitcher actually leaves a pitch over the plate. When Harper connects on the first strike (first pitch or counts of 1 and 0, 2 and 0 or 3 and 0), he bats .492 with an outlandish .983 slugging percentage. He hits with the predatory frightfulness of a cobra: long moments of studied stillness interrupted by sudden violence. To make this approach work, Harper had to come up with a unique plan.



NATIONALS' UNREST

Harper's scuffle with Papelbon on Sunday dredged up past criticisms of the young star during a frustrating season for the team.



Check out the Strike Zone podcast with Ted Keith and Stephen Cannella each week for the latest baseball buzz **SI.com/podcasts**

GREG FIUME/GETTY IMAGES (DUGOUT); ALEX BRANDON/AP



THE AVERAGE major league fastball travels about 92 miles an hour. This is the pitch to which major league hitters calibrate their timing. The conventional wisdom is to anticipate the fastball and react to off-speed pitches. To do the inverse would be like showing up at 7:01 for the 7 a.m. commuter train; having sold out for something slower, it's already by you.

Harper is different. He sits on breaking balls and reacts to fastballs. Not once in while. Not in certain counts. On every pitch.

"I just feel good doing that," he says. "It keeps me on the curveball, it keeps me on the changeup, it keeps me on the heater away, it keeps me on the cutter on the outside half and it doesn't make sense to chase the pitch in. If I'm looking for a curveball and if he throws me something up [by my chin], that's going to suck, but I'm not going to chase this pitch at all. And if he can paint three pitches in, I'll tip my cap."

The more a pitch is inside, the more a batter has to hit it in front of the plate. That means the inside fastball requires the earliest commitment of any pitch. Harper calibrates his swing to breaking balls because he sees so few inside fastballs. He's playing a percentage game.

"How many times are you going to get that pitch?" Harper asks about the fastball on the inside corner. "You'll get it one time, maybe. But you're going to get the curveball three or four times. And if I get curveball-curveball and it's 2 and 0, what's he going to throw? Probably a heater, and that's the heater you're looking for middle to away. If I get up there facing a guy with very good control, every pitch I look for is going to be over the plate. That's why I cannot stand facing rookies and guys who are effectively wild."

The statistics support Harper's approach. Pitchers have thrown Harper 2,597 pitches this year. If you divided the strike zone like a tic-tac-toe box (three rows and three columns), only 206 of those pitches would be in the column nearest Harper—inside strikes. That means there is a 92% chance he's going to see a pitch anywhere but that inside column. And in the rare cases when pitchers do explore that territory, and in the rarer cases still when Harper actually swings, he's almost as likely to get a hit (24) as miss it (13).

To him, the explanation for this huge season is simple: "I think it all goes to being healthy, seeing pitches and staying with my routine," he says.

IF HARPER exhibits strike-zone wisdom, power and the ability to hit for average at age 22, what could he do with even more experience? Six players before Harper hit 40 home runs in their age 22 season or younger. Four of them never hit more homers than they did that season, though all became Hall of Famers: Mel Ott, Joe DiMaggio, Eddie Mathews and Johnny Bench. The two that did improve on that early breakout season were both connected to steroids: Juan Gonzalez, who was named in the Mitchell Report, and Alex Rodriguez, who has admitted to years of steroid use.

What sets Harper apart from them is that he can do so much damage while taking so many pitches. In that regard, the 22-year-old hitter he most resembles is Williams, who hit .406 in his age-22 season. Only Williams had a higher on-base percentage than Harper at such a young age. If Harper gets five more walks, only Williams will have walked more times (147). And, using adjusted OPS as the measuring stick, only Williams was so much better than everybody else in baseball (+51 in 1941) than Harper (+27) at such a young age.

Williams's slash line components at 22 all stood as career highs, though he did improve his home run total in three subsequent seasons. That Harper, in his first uninterrupted season, could be justly measured against the last .400 hitter is confirmation enough of what he has built: a season for the ages. □

Outside the Norm

Bryce Harper's MVP-worthy breakout is impressive not simply because it's one of the best performances ever by a hitter in his age-22 season. Harper is doing this damage while being pitched more carefully than almost every other hitter in the game.

Among the 53 lefthanded hitters who have seen at least 2,000 pitches, **only three have seen more strikes on the outside corner or balls middle-out.**

1. Curtis Granderson, *Mets*	**1,711**
2. Matt Carpenter, *Cardinals*	**1,623**
3. Nick Markakis, *Braves*	**1,606**
4. Harper	**1,656**
5. Anthony Rizzo, *Cubs*	**1,545**

This cautious approach doesn't work: Among those 53 hitters, Harper has the second-highest **batting average on strikes on the outside corner or balls middle-out** . . .

1. Joey Votto, *Reds*	**.346**
2. Harper	**.341**
3. Dee Gordon, *Marlins*	**.331**
4. Jason Kipnis, *Indians*	**.313**
5. Josh Reddick, *A's*	**.307**

. . . and the highest **slugging percentage on strikes on the outside corner or balls middle-out.**

1. Harper	**.655**
2. Votto	**.558**
3. Carlos Gonzalez, *Rockies*	**.545**
4. Chris Davis, *Orioles*	**.534**
5. David Ortiz, *Red Sox*	**.511**

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

EVOLUTIO IS IN THE AIR

OKLAHOMA IS ONE OF SEVERAL TEAMS THRIVING AFTER A RADICAL MAKEOVER. IN TODAY'S GAME, A REFUSAL TO ADAPT CAN PROVE FATAL

BY ALBERT CHEN

Photographs by
Greg Nelson for Sports Illustrated



HIGHER GROUND
The Sooners' stalwart running backs Mixon and Perine, as well as Mayfield (6), have had a lot to celebrate in the offense Riley (inset) brought from East Carolina.





MONDAY MORNING in the Oklahoma war room. Cinema-scale screen on the front wall flickers with game footage. Two yellow legal pads covered with hieroglyphics lie on a conference table. Lincoln Riley gazes up at the scrawling on the white board and the creation entitled Dragon, a play that his offense may or may not have used in a previous game and may or may not roll out in a future one. “Quite frankly, I don’t know if I should be sharing this,” says the Sooners’ first-year offensive coordinator.

At 32, Riley is at the center of one of college football’s boldest and most fascinating reinventions: the Oklahoma offense. He has been called a whiz kid, an innovator, the future of FBS and the last hope for the Bob Stoops era, and the faithful haven’t been timid in letting the boy genius know the expectations in Norman. At a Meet the Sooners event before the season, Riley, a polite, self-effacing northwest Texas native who looks as if he could be (and, according to his adoring old high school teachers, should be) teaching Math 225 in the building next door, was approached by an elderly woman in a scarlet OU T-shirt. “How are you doing, ma’am?” Riley asked. “I’ll be doing just fine,” she snapped back, “if you run the damn ball this year.”

They’ve become an ornery bunch, these proud fans, having watched one of this century’s winningest programs sink toward mediocrity. For the latter half of the 1900s the team honed a relentless ground attack that fit with the state’s steely, no-nonsense image. Stoops arrived in 1999, brash and blustery, and installed a pass-happy system that reaped a championship, in 2000, but also popularized the up-tempo spreads that now dominate the game. (He gave Air Raid practitioner Mike Leach his first big break, hiring him as coordinator in 1999.) Recently, though, the Sooners’ identity has, as Stoops says, “drifted.” Not as the result of any master plan, they ran for 3,395 yards last year, a total not approached since their wishbone days. The elderly woman at the mixer and other traditionalists didn’t much notice or care because the team went 8–5, Stoops’s worst finish in Norman since ’99.

“It’s not like the offense was bad last year—it averaged 35 points,” Riley says as he flips through

a legal pad (the one for game-planning, not the one for sporadic ideas). The season is three weeks old, and with his team on a bye, Riley had a chance to assess his unit's performance: 41, 31—at then No. 23 Tennessee—and 52 points. "It's a pretty good start, but nowhere near where we want to be," he says. In 2010, Riley became the youngest offensive coordinator in the country, getting the job in Greenville, N.C., when he was 26. Within four years the Pirates ranked among the nation's top five in total offense. Then Stoops called, replacing his co-offensive coordinators with a thirtysomething from the American Athletic Conference in what was instantly hailed as the boldest personnel decision of his career. Some view Riley's hiring as a return to the Air Raid era in Norman, but that's a misunderstanding of the new offense, which bears little resemblance to the vertical passing attacks popularized in the early 2000s by Leach at Oklahoma and, later, at Texas Tech. (For starters the 2015 Sooners have run the ball nine more times than they've thrown it.) What's going down in Norman is Quentin Tarantino rebooting the James Bond franchise or David Chang taking over the kitchen at Chili's: an inspired reimagining of a brand that had gone stale.

How much things have changed became clear quickly, when the Sooners kicked off the season against Akron with walk-on junior quarterback Baker Mayfield under center. In his first start Mayfield broke Heisman Trophy winner Sam Bradford's school record for passing yards in an opener (388). The following week Oklahoma trailed 17–3 before rattling off 28 points in the fourth quarter and overtime to pull off a defeat of Tennessee that Stoops, the winningest coach in OU history, called "maybe my favorite of all of them." By the third game, in which the 6' 1", 209-pound Mayfield piled up a school-record 572 total yards and six touchdowns in a 52–38 win over Tulsa, analysts were already tripping over themselves to compare the unknown QB—Stoops didn't know who the kid was when the two bumped into each other at a team event last January—to Johnny Manziel. Baker Football, anyone?

The Sooners should be favored in their next six games, leading up to their Nov. 14 showdown at No. 5 Baylor. Suddenly, they're a dark-horse playoff contender and a must-watch both for Heisman voters and for other coaches seeking inspiration to try something new.

Of course, nothing is guaranteed when you have a quarterback with Mayfield's meager experience and a raw defensive line, but the early returns on Stoops's great gamble are promising. They also serve as a reminder that while pressing the reboot button may seem risky, perhaps even desperate, it is often necessary.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL success is ephemeral, but this season there seems to be an abundance of programs in search of a new identity. For coaches the challenge is remaining one step ahead, "without sacrificing your roots," says Stoops.

"It's natural when you run a system like I have for over 25 years that you become accustomed to doing things a certain way," Brian Kelly said at the start of his sixth season at Notre Dame. He was talking about his decision to bring in new offensive coordinator Mike Sanford from Boise State to enliven the play-calling. "When you get the question, Why do you do it that way? then you have to answer honestly. That kind of turns it upside down a little bit."

Before the 2014 season, after only his second losing record in 13 years at TCU, Gary Patterson didn't turn his offense upside down, he tossed it away completely. Half-measures would have been accepted in Fort Worth in the wake of the Horned Frogs' 4–8

FIVE-YEAR PLANS ARE FOUR YEARS TOO LONG.



BEN MCKEOWN/ICON SPORTSWIRE (TAR HEELS)



CHANGE OF DIRECTION

TCU underwent a philosophical shift last season that made Boykin (above) a star and the Frogs playoff contenders, while a new defensive approach has the 3–1 Tar Heels rising in the ACC.

finish—the team was young and had lost four games by three points or less—but Patterson chose an overhaul, demoting his co-offensive coordinators and replacing them with Doug Meacham, the OC and quarterbacks coach at Houston, and Sonny Cumbie, the co-offensive coordinator at Texas Tech, a pair with roots in the Air Raid. It was a stunning shift: The defensive stalwart was suddenly all-in on a system that downplayed the run and allowed for limited clock management.

Patterson regarded the changes as more than a retooling of the playbook. "It's truly a change of philosophy," the coach declared before the 2014 kickoff, equating his old approach, winning 17–13 slugfests, to drinking water while other teams guzzled Gatorade. In no time the Frogs were running on Red Bull, finishing second in scoring (46.5 ppg) behind dual-threat quarterback Trevone Boykin, who had been switched to receiver in '13. When TCU wound up 12–1, Boykin could have become mayor of Fort Worth. The reinvention seems even more prescient now: The No. 4 Horned Frogs have needed to run up scores because of injuries to their defense. After Saturday's 55–52 win at Texas Tech, TCU is 86th in scoring D.

The lesson from Fort Worth: In college football, where five-year plans are about four years too long, even for consistent winners, a tear down is sometimes the only way to stay on top.

Not that every makeover is a success. "These things, they take time," says BYU offensive coordinator Robert Anae, who arrived in Provo three years ago to install a wide-open offense after longtime coach Bronco Mendenhall's run-based attack sputtered. "You mold your offense to the talent you have." This season the Cougars were poised to take off with Heisman candidate Taysom Hill at the helm, only to see the senior break his foot two quarters into the season. "Suddenly we have a freshman [Tanner Mangum] at quarterback, and we're back to square one, trying to find who we are."

With full-throttle passing offenses dominating the game—51 of the 63 quarterbacks who have thrown for 4,000 yards have done so since 2000—schools have been snapping up offensive gurus, but defenses haven't given up trying to slow them down. For four years Kevin Sumlin has presided over a Texas A&M team that has perennially paired dynamic offenses with leaky D's (the Aggies ranked 109th and 102nd in '13 and '14 respectively). This off-season Sumlin poached John Chavis from LSU, where he'd been in charge of the defense since '09. Chavis quickly set about changing the culture, and with their 28–21 overtime defeat of Arkansas last Saturday, the 4–0 Aggies seem to be on their way to building a Wrecking Crew–quality unit. At UCLA fourth-year coach Jim Mora hired former

CAMPUS RUSH

WEEK 4 THOUGHTS

The next big test for Oklahoma's retooled offense comes on Nov. 14 against No. 5 Baylor, which has averaged a nation-leading 64.0 points in three victories. But for the first half in Waco, the Bears won't have the services of passing-game coordinator Jeff Lebby; his first-half suspension by the school ensures that he will not see more than two halves of live Sooners football this year.

During Oklahoma's 52–38 win over Tulsa on Sept. 19, Sooners compliance officials confronted Lebby—who was a student-coach at OU—after he was spotted on Tulsa's sideline in Golden Hurricane colors. Lebby (*right*, in blue) was in violation of NCAA bylaw 11.6.1, which prohibits off-campus, in-person scouting of future opponents, so he was asked to leave. The 31-year-old coach claimed ignorance of the rule and stepped away from the bench area but remained on the sideline. A source with knowledge of the incident says that Lebby lingered a few minutes because he was waiting for Baylor's compliance office to confirm the rule.

Bears coach Art Briles called the incident "embarrassing" but denied knowing that Lebby, his son-in-law, would be attending the game. Tulsa coach Philip Montgomery, a former Baylor assistant, blamed himself, saying he made a mistake in leaving sideline passes for Lebby and his wife, Staley. Oklahoma coach Bob Stoops took a harder line. "[It's] a pretty fundamental rule," he said. "I don't know what he was doing here."

In April 2014, Baylor offensive coordinator Kendal Briles (Art's son) was cleared by the NCAA after accusations of



improper contact with recruits. Last month the school suspended Kendal and receivers coach Tate Wallis for its Sept. 12 game against Lamar, a 66–31 thrashing, for similar recruiting violations that took place last spring. Athletic director Ian McCaw declined to comment for this story.

"Things continue to happen," says a Big 12 source. "[When they do] you lose some of the benefit of the doubt."

–Thayer Evans and Pete Thamel

Penn State coordinator Tom Bradley to bring a versatile scheme (not to mention an East Coast edge). The Bruins have a flashy freshman quarterback in Josh Rosen, but the recharged defense has propelled the seventh-ranked Bruins' 4–0 start, capped by a 56–30 win at Arizona. Both Texas A&M and UCLA, after remaking their defenses, have emerged as playoff contenders.

"You have to keep evolving," says first-year North Carolina defensive coordinator Gene Chizik. "The game has changed so much on the offensive side over the last 10 years, it's a cat and mouse game where you can't stay stagnant in what you do."

"We very much wiped the slate clean, and started from the beginning," says Chizik, who led Auburn to a national championship in his second year as the Tigers' head coach in '11 and was fired a year later after a 3–9 season. Through four games, the Tar Heels' D under Chizik's 4–3 scheme looks like one of the most improved units in the conference, allowing 14.8 points a game as the team hit 3–1 for the first time since 2011. "We're headed in the right direction but still have a way to go. We realize in this age of instant gratification, we don't have three years to build something."

I'VE ASKED this question a number of times: How did we drift so far?" Stoops is sitting in a stadium suite overlooking an empty Owen Field. In his polo shirt and blue jeans he looks decades younger than his 55 years. "I believe in offense," says the man who arrived from Florida, where he was a vaunted defensive coordinator, and won with offenses that shattered record books. Last off-season Stoops did some research and learned that seven of the top 13 attacks had roots in the Air Raid. "It was eye-opening: I'm thinking, it worked for us. I'd made it popular years ago, and I'm practically the only one not doing it."

The co-coordinators that Stoops sent packing were Jay Norvell and the main play-caller, Josh Heupel (best known as the quarterback on the 2000 championship team). While East Carolina's wild success—third in the country in passing offense and fifth in total offense in '14—was no secret, Stoops had never heard of the mastermind of the unit. He found that Riley first turned heads as a 26-year-old assistant at Texas Tech, when he was thrust into the role of play-caller at the '10 Alamo Bowl against Michigan State. (His boss, Leach, was fired three days before the game.) Knowing that it could be a make-or-break moment—"I don't want to say *defining*," Riley says, "but you knew it was going to shape the years down the road"—he led the Red Raiders to a 41–31 win and 579 total yards.

Riley is typecast as an Air Raid acolyte, and while the years under Leach's tutelage shaped him, it wasn't

JACKSON LAIZURE/GETTY IMAGES

until he joined the Pirates that the true experimentation began. "People would say what we did was unique or cutting edge [at Texas Tech], but we didn't do a lot of different stuff there. We just got really good at it," Riley says. "Go back and watch them now, and each game looks about the same. Whereas when I got to East Carolina, I had to learn to adapt to the personnel. We had to learn different ways to get it done."

The Air Raid uses packaged concepts, in which most plays have a run or pass option and the quarterback reacts based on the defense: If a cornerback inches up to defend the edge, the QB dumps the ball to one of two receivers; if the corner stays back, he hands the ball off or turns upfield himself. Riley's take on the Air Raid most resembles Baylor's scheme in general, but he is shaping his play-calling to Oklahoma's strengths—not only Mayfield but also senior wideout Sterling Shepard and sophomore running back Samaje Perine, who ran for a record 427 yards against Kansas last year. As Riley adjusts, the offense that will be on display in November may not look much like the one that the Sooners have run to date.

This much is clear: Despite the Air Raid label ("Things have changed so much someone really needs to come up with a new name," says Riley), the running attack remains integral at OU. "The days of throwing it 70 times a game are starting to phase out," Riley says. "Defenses have caught up, and it's hard to have a good enough offensive line to protect that much, as defensive linemen are getting more athletic and defenses go small to catch up to the speed of the game."

Practices in Norman have become track meets—"We practice light years faster than last year, it's practically game speed up and down the field," says senior center Ty Darlington—which the Sooners also believe will improve the defense (run by Bob's brother Mike for the last four years), giving the unit daily looks at the pace it will face against conference rivals Baylor, TCU, Oklahoma State and Texas Tech.

Time stands still in the heart of Norman. Along Lindsey Street, the main drag through campus, towering bronze statues of the Heisman winners—Billy Vessels, Steve Owens, Billy Sims, Jason White, Sam Bradford—rest along the cobblestone road. Memorial Stadium, the old red-brick shrine, stands out against an impossibly blue heartland sky. Stoops arrived 16 years ago, but it sometimes seems as if he's been here much longer, and faced with the prospect of becoming another frozen monument to the good old days, he chose to pursue the future. What he and the Sooners believe they are now developing is a system that will endure. "An offense that can be whatever the situation needs it to be," says Riley. Of course, they know that if Oklahoma doesn't keep winning, Bob Stoops's great gamble could quickly turn into a colossal failure.

"Our identity will evolve," Riley says. "But soon, people are going to know who we are." He looks up at the whiteboard again, at Dragon, and decides there's no use to keep the play under wraps—after all, nothing lasts in college football, players and coaches and systems come and go. "We ran this against Tulsa," he says, tapping at the shotgun, three wide-out set. "We knew how they attacked the run, so we came up with this play-action, creating an option to go to either one of these two," he says, pointing at two dime-sized circles that represent receivers. "We knew they couldn't cover both of them based on how they attacked."

The Sooners used it to gain 26 yards during a second-quarter drive. "Big play for us there, but nothing too elaborate, really," Riley says. "Just a little new twist to make something big happen." □

"HOW DID WE DRIFT SO FAR?" STOOPS WONDERED.

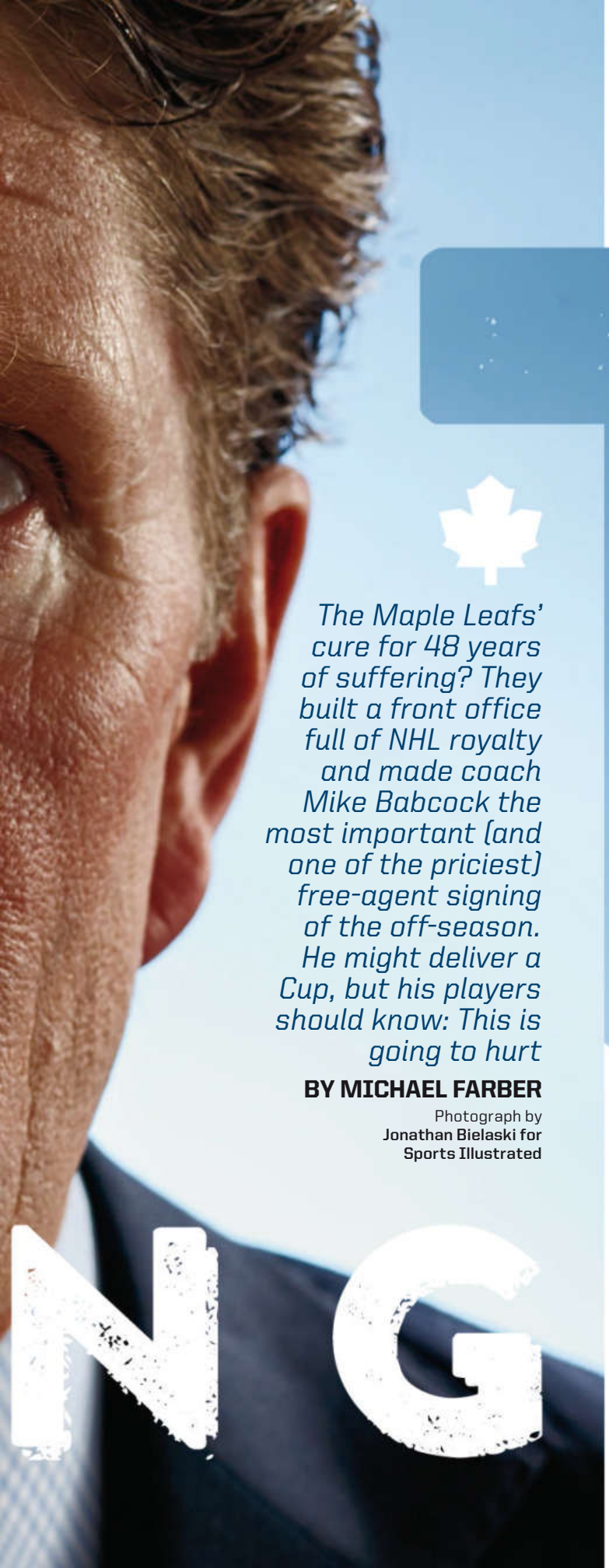


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SHAKE 'N' BAKER

In the first three games Mayfield, a Texas Tech transfer, has accounted for 1,201 yards and 14 touchdowns.


P AIN
IS
C O M I



The Maple Leafs' cure for 48 years of suffering? They built a front office full of NHL royalty and made coach Mike Babcock the most important (and one of the priciest) free-agent signing of the off-season. He might deliver a Cup, but his players should know: This is going to hurt

BY MICHAEL FARBER

Photograph by
Jonathan Bielaski for Sports Illustrated

THREE DECADES before he was hired to raise the dead in Toronto, at a salary of $120,192 a week, Mike Babcock worked summers on the killing floor of Intercontinental Packers in Saskatoon for 12 bucks an hour. He was never an actual cow knocker; the worker beside him killed the animals. Babcock was the noses-hooves-horns man. Seven weeks ago, in a 46th-floor hotel lounge a few blocks west of the Air Canada Centre, he jumped to his feet to pantomime the process. "The nail goes into the brain—*boom!*—the guy shackles it, hangs it up," Babcock said. "Bull gets whacked, then it comes to you, and you're skinning the nose, hooves and horn before it goes to the next guy. Blood's squirting all over." He reclaimed his chair. "Also worked on the pig pack. They're already slaughtered and cooled off, and they come to you, almost frozen, and you trim the excess. Jowl mountain."

There is Summer Mike and Winter Mike, his wife, Rene, likes to say, but his passion does not change like the seasons. Words tumble out, elbows up, jostling. One Babcock staple is "fantastic," and here he taps the brakes, drawing out the first syllable with a flat *a*. Another is "hard," and he hits the *r* like a cartoon pirate. During an expansive answer he might refer to himself in the third person, the way Elmo does on *Sesame Street*, but there is no scrollwork in his man's-man speech. Babcock went shirtless under his slaughterhouse slicker. In that Toronto hotel, gazing out on tacking sailboats on Lake Ontario, he wore a blue-and-white Maple Leafs golf shirt.

From abattoir to the Leafs . . . the jokes just write themselves.

In the carnivorous NHL, the



Maple Leafs have been offal. Toronto has made the playoffs just once since the 2004–05 lockout—in '13 it blew a 4–1 third-period lead and lost Game 7 to Boston in overtime—and is a 100-to-1 shot to win the 2016 Stanley Cup, according to the Westgate Superbook. After Randy Carlyle was fired last January, the team took a knee under interim coach Peter Horachek, finishing 9-28-5. Sixty-eight points was the franchise's lowest total in a nonlockout season in almost two decades.

But the shabby performance of the thick-wallet organization, the only hockey team listed among *Forbes*'s 50 most valuable sports franchises, is better filtered through the membrane of history. Toronto has won 13 Cups, second only to Montreal's 24, but none since 1967, nine months after color television was introduced in Canada. Since the '67 expansion, Toronto players have won a major regular-season award—Hart, Art Ross, Norris, Vezina, Rocket Richard, Selke, Calder—just once. Despite employing men of hockey pedigree—president Ken Dryden (six Stanley Cups), general manager Brian Burke (2007 Cup), and coaches Pat Quinn ('02 Olympic gold medal), Ron Wilson ('96 World Cup) and Carlyle ('07 Cup)—no one has found a cure for what Burke calls blue-and-white disease, the complacency that infects some players in the nexus of the sport. Toronto is home to NHL hockey operations, television networks that are financial struts for the league (Sportsnet is entering the second year of its 12-year, CA$5.2 billion contract) and 566 youth teams in the Greater Toronto Hockey League, but the heritage franchise has been a punching bag when it hasn't been a punch line.

"To me, this challenge is the Everest of hockey," Maple Leafs president Brendan Shanahan says. "There are certain people, certain personalities, that want Everest. . . . I think Mike is built for Toronto. You need to have that skin, you need to have that chin."

Theoretically, this is the perfect marriage. After last season Babcock was a free agent with a gilt-edged résumé—10 straight playoff appearances with Detroit, a Stanley Cup (in 2008 with the Red Wings), two losses in seven-game finals ('03 with Anaheim, '09 with Detroit) and Olympic gold with Team Canada in '10 and '14. Toronto was seeking a credible coach. After turning down a five-year, $20 million extension from Detroit and an offer by potential-rich Buffalo that essentially mirrored the one from Toronto, he cashed the golden ticket—$50 million over eight years. Six-point-two-five average. First-line money, and more than double the salary of Joel Quenneville, whose Blackhawks have won three Cups in six years. Says Red Wings GM Ken Holland, "Babs won the lottery."

WHY TORONTO? Consider a theory. You know how the NHL suspends a player for one game in the playoffs for an offense that would have cost him two during the year because of the postseason's relative importance? Well, there's also Stanley Cup math. One Cup in Toronto would be exponentially greater than two or three elsewhere (e.g., 1994 New York Rangers; 54-year drought). So an ambitious coach in Toronto gets a two-for-one deal: Win a Cup, get a statue. "I couldn't see leaving Detroit for someplace other than an Original Six team, but I wanted to try something new," Babcock says. "The hockey market, let's be honest, it's been a coach's graveyard. Why would I be naive enough to think I could be different? I guess I just am. [We have to] be patient. Get good things going. Not deviate from the plan. Set ourselves up for a 10-year run. It's probably going to take us three years to get that run set up." When Babcock was introduced on May 20 in a press conference televised across Canada, he memorably cautioned,

CULTURE SHAME
Shanahan (above left) hired Lamoriello (right) to bring respectability back to a franchise that had become a laughingstock.



BRIAN B. BETTENCOURT/TORONTO STAR/GETTY IMAGES (SHANAHAN AND LAMORIELLO); JEFF VINNICK/NHLI/GETTY IMAGES (FANS)

"If you think there's no pain coming . . . there's pain coming."

Now there's a slogan. If coaching doesn't work out, Babcock could try the marketing department—although presumably Toronto is as stacked there as it is everywhere else off the ice. The Maple Leafs list 48 hockey operations people on their organizational chart, 32 more than Florida. They employ a skating development consultant and a director of sports science and performance. Toronto has four algorithm all-stars dedicated to analytics. (The Leafs circa 1950, per owner Conn Smythe: "If you can't beat 'em in the alley, you can't beat 'em on the ice." The Leafs circa 2015, per statistically inclined assistant GM Kyle Dubas: We'll decimal point you to death.) In July they shipped Phil Kessel, who averaged 30 goals in six seasons with the Leafs, to Pittsburgh *(sidebar, right)*, but last month they traded for the swift Michael Grabner, a premier penalty killer who once scored 34 goals in a season. They also hired a special assignment coach, Jacques Lemaire, who will, Babcock says, "coach the coaches." Displaying his bedrock self-belief, Babcock asked for Lemaire on his '10 Team Canada staff; no insecure coach surrounds himself with a hockey brain as fertile as his own. Lemaire, a Hall of Fame center with the '70s Montreal dynasty, coached a Cup winner in '95 for the man who is now the Maple Leafs' GM, a sign of the apocalypse in itself.

That's right, Lou Lamoriello is in Toronto. Hell has frozen over.

For 28 years Lamoriello was not merely New Jersey's GM. He *was* the Devils in the way Paul Brown was the original Cleveland Browns. Like Mario or Gordie or Rocket, Lou is a one-name hockey guy. After winning three Cups in New Jersey, he ceded the GM job to Ray Shero in May and seemed ready to settle in as Devil-for-life and president of the NHL's equivalent of the witness-protection program. "The Toronto

PENGUINS

After six embattled seasons in Toronto, Phil Kessel could prove that one team's castoff may be a superstar center's long-awaited answer

BY JEREMY FUCHS

After months of speculation about perennial scapegoat Phil Kessel, the Maple Leafs' new regime finally jettisoned him on July 1—but not without a golden parachute. Instead of punishing the 28-year-old right wing for the team's failures, Toronto dispatched him to Pittsburgh, where he'll begin a potentially career-altering partnership with superstar center Sidney Crosby.

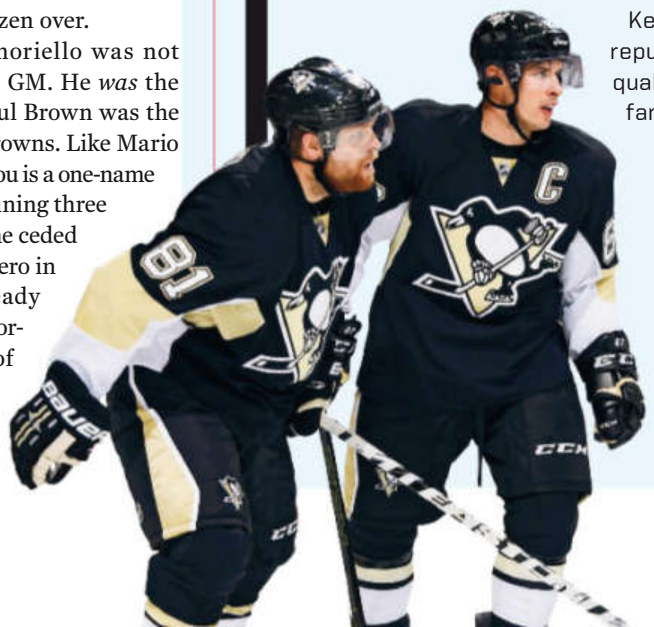
Kessel, who ranks fifth in goals (181) since 2009–10, brings all-world speed and a lethal wrist shot to Crosby's wing, a spot occupied mostly by mediocre players for the last 10 years. Crosby will, in turn, give his new teammate breathing room: Without having to face a voracious press corps daily or bear the brunt of failures as he did in Toronto, Kessel *(below, 81, with Crosby)* can just focus on playing.

"We put so much more depth in our forward lines, a lot more balance," GM Jim Rutherford says. "We should be able to win games [in] different ways now."

Crosby's tactical north-south game will force the more instinctually inclined Kessel to adjust, but his blazing speed should complement Crosby's quick playmaking abilities. In their preseason debut, Kessel scored twice, and his new linemate Crosby earned assists on both goals. Kessel's shoot-first mentality should lift an offense that ranked 19th, especially on the power play, where Pittsburgh struggled late last season (13.9% in its final 38 games, including the playoffs). A dearth of goals, particularly in their first-round defeat to the Rangers, was a major factor in another early exit for the Penguins.

Kessel also has the chance to shed his reputation for being aloof and indifferent—qualities that had scores of columnists and fans celebrating his departure from Toronto. "He's not a bad guy at all," Maple Leafs defenseman Morgan Rielly says. "[The media] tried to paint him that way a little bit. But that never bothered him, and I think the fact that he wasn't bothered by it really bothered the media."

The good news for Pittsburgh? Even if Kessel doesn't find long-term chemistry with Crosby, there's always Plan B: lining him up next to the team's other playmaking phenom, Evgeni Malkin. □



JOE SARGENT/PITTSBURGH PENGUINS



Maple Leafs are such a departure from the New Jersey Devils," Shanahan says, "that people would think this was the last place for Lou." Within 10 weeks, Lamoriello says, he went from "intrigued" to "excited" to filing immigration papers. The hiring was managed without a whisper of industry gossip, a coup so stealthy that it looked like something Lou would do. Lamoriello, who turns 73 this month, has a three-year contract. For the first time in his NHL life, his boss is someone other than an owner.

There are two probable endings to this meeting of high hockey foreheads.

1) Led by the conspicuously clever Shanahan, the Leafs draft wisely, develop patiently and trade judiciously. With a GM who provides organizational discipline and a driven coach who teaches and hectors players to new heights, Toronto parades the Cup down Yonge Street. Or:

2) Led by an inexperienced president in Shanahan, Lamoriello, who has no hammer in dealing with a stubborn coach, continues his pedestrian post–2004–05 performance, which included poor signings such as defenseman Vladimir Malakhov, in 2005, and a cap-circumventing 17-year deal with Ilya Kovalchuk that cost the Devils a draft pick and a $1.5 million fine. Babcock, whose Wings won just three playoff series since 2009, finds structure does not equate to victories, and he leaves Toronto early as players chafe at his bristling style. While the strong personalities running the Leafs may be on the same page, the situation devolves and Toronto becomes, regrettably, a Tower of Babs.

"You want people to tell you things that other people won't," Lamoriello says. "I want Brendan to question me. I want Mike to question me. But they're going to want me to question them, too. Internally. The key will be all of us telling each other what we sometimes don't want to hear."

"Sure, it could work there," Holland says. "For me, it's all about relationships."

"MIKE IS BUILT FOR TORONTO," SAYS SHANAHAN. "YOU NEED TO HAVE THAT SKIN."

AT A coaching clinic in Regina in June, Babcock offered counsel that had nothing to do with forecheck schemes or breakouts. "These kids you're coaching," he said, "one of them is going to be your doctor, one is going to be your lawyer, and one is going to be your boss. Make sure you treat 'em good." Indeed.

The Maple Leafs' president was one of those kids grown up. When Babcock arrived in Detroit in 2005, Shanahan was months from turning 37. The future Hall of Fame winger had not scored 40 goals since 1999–2000. In his one season with Babcock, he got 40. Babcock prodded him to return to what Shanahan calls "snotty areas," back to his roots as a crease crasher rather than a shooter—speaking truth to power forward, as it were. The coach was constantly in Shanahan's ear, almost literally. As part of his pregame routine, Shanahan would stand in a particular spot in the hallway as Wings teammates exited the dressing room for the ice. Babcock would leave his office and plant himself inches to Shanahan's left. As Shanahan stared straight ahead, Babcock would yammer, "Need you tonight, big guy" and "Be movin' those feet." This was Babcock as Jiminy Cricket, Shanahan's exasperating hockey conscience. "At one point I said to him," Shanahan recalls, " 'I've been standing in this spot for nine seasons. Are you going to make me move?' "

BENCHMARKER

Babcock will demand structure and responsibility from a Leafs team that won just nine games in the second half of 2014–15.

After scoring his 600th career goal in his Rangers debut against Washington in October 2006—Shanahan was tripped as he drove to the net, clambered to his skates and tapped one in from the goalmouth—he signed the stick and shipped it to Babcock, a token of appreciation for resurrecting his game. Shanahan recalls autographing only one other item for an opposing coach or GM. After his 1,000th NHL game, for the Wings in New Jersey in 2001, he signed his jersey to Lamoriello: "I played my first game here and my 1,000th. I have you to thank for that."

Lamoriello was the man who told Shanahan he could play—he picked Shanahan second overall in 1987 in his first draft with the Devils. And after a curtain-call season in New Jersey, in 2008–09, Lamoriello was the one who told him he couldn't.

Now Shanahan makes the calls. If hockey is complex, it is less complicated than evolving personal relationships. If they had 10 conversations before Lamo-

BRUCE LADOUCEUR FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

COACHES

SI's NHL insider **PIERRE MCGUIRE** ranks the top 15 head coaches in the league.

1 **JOEL QUENNEVILLE** *Blackhawks* He treats his players with respect and can motivate his stars at key times. He has the confidence to delegate to his assistants.

2 **MIKE BABCOCK** *Maple Leafs* The NHL's best coach in terms of creating structure and game planning. Tactical and wise, he is not afraid of big moments.

3 **ALAIN VIGNEAULT** *Rangers* A believer in high-octane hockey, he has taught it well in New York. He is polished and capable of dealing with the scrutiny of the Big Apple.

4 **CLAUDE JULIEN** *Bruins* Extremely intense and a hard driver, he creates roles for players and demands they live up to those responsibilities. Tactically underrated.

5 **PETER LAVIOLETTE** *Predators* He understands how to teach offensive puck pressure and has become more player-friendly as he has matured.

6 **BOB HARTLEY** *Flames* Last year's Jack Adams winner, the onetime bully to players has grown to understand that creating a healthy environment matters.

7 **TODD MCLELLAN** *Oilers* He learned the ropes from the best in the business. He has a hard edge but can get through to young players. A perfect hire for Edmonton.

8 **DAVE TIPPETT** *Coyotes* Once a cerebral player, he's an even better coach because of his brains. In Arizona he always finds a way to squeeze a lot out of very little.

9 **JON COOPER** *Lightning* A fantastic communicator and one of the best young coaches, he excels at keeping the message fresh and trusts the skills of his players.

10 **BARRY TROTZ** *Capitals* His teams can always survive in any type of game. Honest and loyal, he demands maximum effort at all times.

11 **KEN HITCHCOCK** *Blues* A proud teacher who can communicate his message in different ways, he can be very intense during game situations.

12 **DARRYL SUTTER** *Kings* Missing the playoffs last season, for just his second time in 15 years as an NHL head coach, will fuel an L.A. bounce-back in 2015–16.

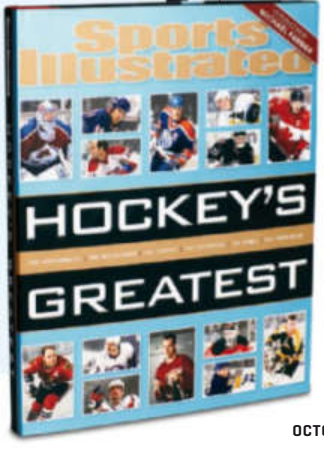
13 **LINDY RUFF** *Stars* He teaches team defense but really loves to turn his offensive players loose. Art Ross Trophy winner Jamie Benn is proof of that.

14 **TODD RICHARDS** *Blue Jackets* After a two-year run in Minnesota, he learned to communicate better. He won't be underrated for long.

15 **BRUCE BOUDREAU** *Ducks* A true hockey junkie and rink rat, he trusts his team, especially his skilled players. All he needs now is a trip to the Stanley Cup finals.

BEST OF THE BEST

Does Babcock join the likes of Scotty Bowman and Al Arbour on the list of the top coaches in NHL history? Find out in SI's *Hockey's Greatest*, out Oct. 6.



riello's hiring, Shanahan asked in all 10, "Would you be comfortable reporting to me?"

"I think it comes down to Lou respecting my position, whether he thought of me as that kid he drafted or not," Shanahan says. "I think I got Lou's attention when I chose to go work [in the league's Department of Player Safety] after I retired. I put on a tie, rode the subway, went to meetings, sat in a cubicle." In the NHL offices any last vestige of the 18-year-old boy from Mimico, Ont., disappeared. "I spent three years calling [Rangers president Glen] Sather and Lou Lamoriello and telling them their players were suspended in the playoffs," Shanahan says. "I got my big-boy pants."

On Sept. 10, as Shanahan addressed a fan forum in Toronto alongside his coach and GM, the big-boy pants were jeans, no socks. Lamoriello was in a dark suit and a crisp white shirt, no tie. Casual Thursday. In New Jersey, he had no tolerance for grungy two-day beards. And Maple Leafs players, though unwilling to divulge Lou's rules, reported to training camp looking as if they all walked out of a Gillette commercial. Metaphorically at least, there are no third uniforms in Lamoriello's world. "Lou's like an Ansel Adams photograph—black and white," says an admiring Burke, the ex-Leafs and current Flames president who played forward for Lamoriello at Providence College in the 1970s.

Says Ken Daneyko, who spent his entire 20-year career on New Jersey's blue line, "Lou's a perfect fit for Toronto. This is an organization that hasn't had structure or discipline. They didn't know how to win three in a row without losing the next five."

Lamoriello had 11 coaches in his last 15 seasons in New Jersey. He will not be able to play that card with the bulletproof Babcock, whom he knows well because "you have to know as much as you can without others knowing what you know." Lamoriello

has tracked him since Babcock's success as a coach in junior hockey. He watched as the Devils beat Babcock's Ducks in the 2003 Cup finals. They would chat at the draft. He quizzed Lemaire about Babcock after the '10 Olympics. "He's someone I would have hired," Lamoriello says. "Because he was hired before me, should I feel that's wrong?"

THIS WAS not the plan. Coaching? Nah, he was going to wear corduroy jackets with leather elbow patches and teach at McGill. Babcock didn't even become a coach until he returned from a hockey lark as a player-coach in England, and his mother, Gail, wondered aloud if her 24-year-old son was ready to ditch his beer-commercial lifestyle. His brother-in-law told him Red Deer College, in Alberta, was looking for a coach. Babcock applied, changed into his suit in the parking lot and aced the interview. The other reason Babcock drove to Red Deer in 1988: It was only 90 minutes from the Calgary Stampede, the biggest summer bash in Canada.

The party ended ages ago. Now Winter Mike pushes. *Harrrd.* After Tampa Bay eliminated the Red Wings last spring, Babcock accompanied Holland to Grand Rapids to watch their AHL affiliate in the Calder Cup playoffs. During the drive Babcock, whose contract would expire in June, asked, "Is my time here up?" The GM told him he had absolutely not worn out his welcome, eventually adding a fifth year to Detroit's standing offer. The Red Wings were prepared to make Babcock hockey's richest coach, even if it had NHL-ready coach Jeff Blashill, now Babcock's successor, in Grand Rapids. But Detroit was not going to pay more than $4 million per year.

Playing for Babcock takes a toll; this coach accepts only exact change. "It was time. I think Mike felt that, and [the players] felt that," Red Wings captain Henrik Zetterberg says. "The way he

CONFERENCE

The Islanders will christen their new barn in style—with a trip to the Stanley Cup finals

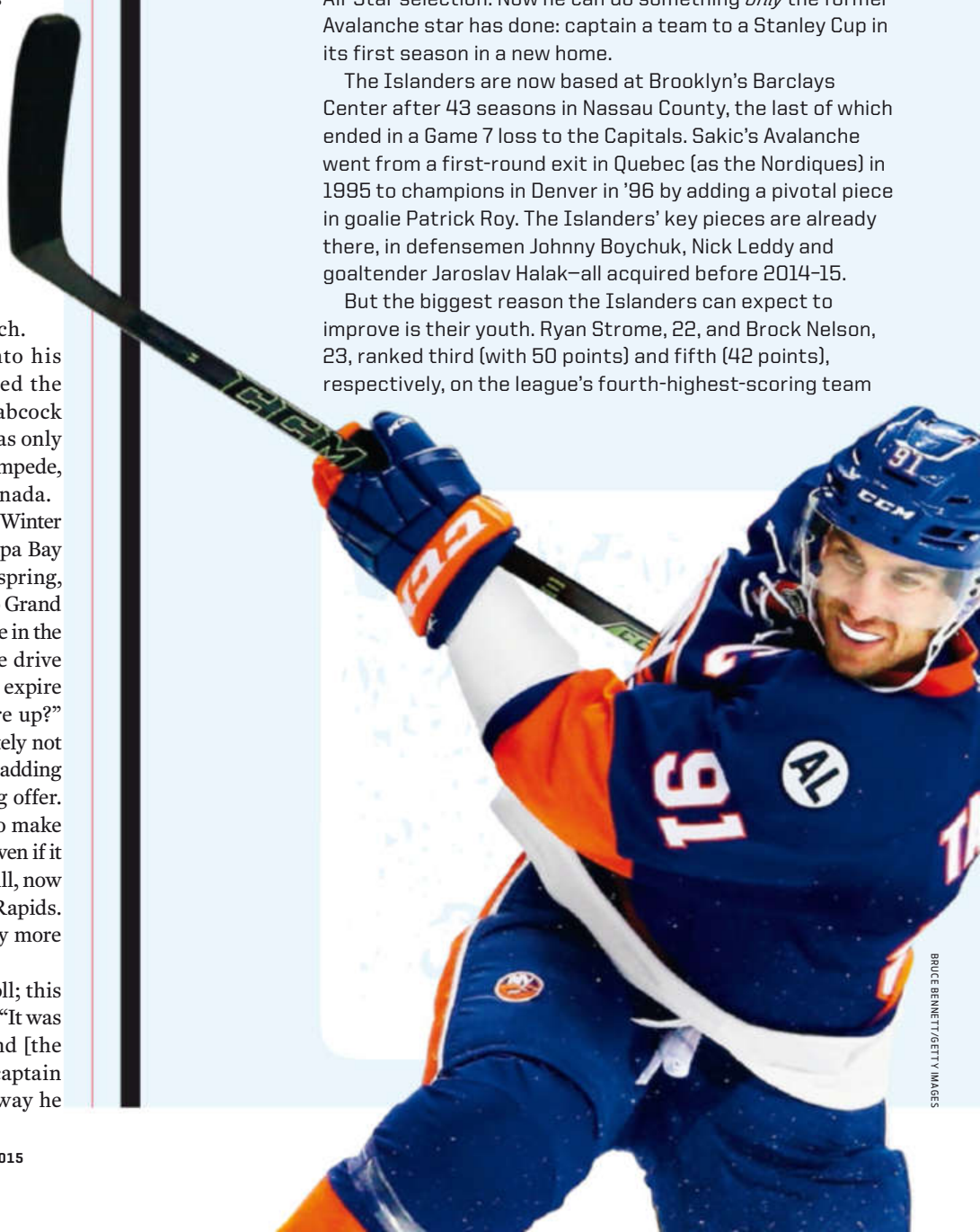
BY SAM PAGE

THE PICK

At age 25, Islanders center John Tavares has already matched several of his childhood hero Joe Sakic's biggest achievements, including an Olympic gold and a First Team All-Star selection. Now he can do something *only* the former Avalanche star has done: captain a team to a Stanley Cup in its first season in a new home.

The Islanders are now based at Brooklyn's Barclays Center after 43 seasons in Nassau County, the last of which ended in a Game 7 loss to the Capitals. Sakic's Avalanche went from a first-round exit in Quebec (as the Nordiques) in 1995 to champions in Denver in '96 by adding a pivotal piece in goalie Patrick Roy. The Islanders' key pieces are already there, in defensemen Johnny Boychuk, Nick Leddy and goaltender Jaroslav Halak—all acquired before 2014–15.

But the biggest reason the Islanders can expect to improve is their youth. Ryan Strome, 22, and Brock Nelson, 23, ranked third (with 50 points) and fifth (42 points), respectively, on the league's fourth-highest-scoring team



BRUCE BENNETT/GETTY IMAGES

in 2014–15. In the salary-cap era, scoring depth is a function of teams aggressively promoting inexperienced skill players. And after drafting high so often (five top five picks since 2009), the Islanders boast a nonpareil stable of forward prospects.

ON THE DOORSTEP

The Lightning's biggest weakness entering 2015–16 may be their own recent success. Opponents now know they have to plan for center Steven Stamkos and "the Triplets" (forwards Tyler Johnson, Nikita Kucherov and Ondrej Palat). Netminder Ben Bishop built upon his breakout 2013–14, but his .916 save percentage last year was buoyed by a strong penalty kill (83.7%). If he regresses, Tampa Bay may have to turn to 21-year-old Andrei Vasilevskiy sooner than it would like.

In the three seasons since they traded center Jordan Staal, the Penguins have seen progressively worse results. Part of the problem was that Staal's replacement, Brandon Sutter, struggled to neutralize opposing top lines. The team did well to ship the center to the Canucks this off-season while welcoming Toronto castoff Phil Kessel, whose uncharacteristically low shooting percentage last season (8.9%) could see a significant boost now that he's playing alongside Sidney Crosby.

Rangers goalie Henrik Lundqvist will keep New York in the mix even as the offense copes with the losses of speedy winger Carl Hagelin (to Anaheim) and veteran forward Martin St. Louis (retired). Alain Vigneault is one of hockey's best bench bosses, but with $11.2 million of New York's cap space devoted to overrated defensemen Marc Staal and Dan Girardi, Vigneault is too often stuck coaching around his roster's limitations.

Montreal's Carey Price is every bit the goaltender his Hart and Vezina trophies would suggest. But even exceptional goalies are subject to cruel bounces, making Price's season and, subsequently, the Canadiens' hard to predict. Defenseman Jeff Petry and winger Alexander Semin were shrewd additions, but Montreal's biggest weakness—coach Michel Therrien—went unaddressed.

ONE PLAYER AWAY

With stars Alex Ovechkin and Nicklas Backstrom, the Capitals have always seemed a little top-heavy. Newly acquired wingers T.J. Oshie (55 points with St. Louis) and Justin Williams (41 points for L.A.), however, balance out the right side of Washington's top six. But can overworked goalie Braden Holtby maintain excellence through another 70-start year?

The Bruins followed up a disappointing season (missing the playoffs for the first time since 2006–07) with a brutal off-season, trading future franchise defenseman Dougie Hamilton to Calgary in June for draft picks. But this team still has enough talent, starting with goalie Tuukka Rask and center Patrice Bergeron, to see playoff action again.

The Blue Jackets went 15-1-1 in their final 17 games last season, removing themselves from the Connor McDavid draft sweepstakes but proving they may not need him. Newly minted Cup winner Brandon Saad, acquired from Chicago, improves a physical and skilled top six. But the bottom six and defense are still weak.

HOW THEY RANK

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WAIT TILL NEXT YEAR

After reaching the playoffs for the 24th straight season, the Red Wings go for 25 without longtime coach Mike Babcock. His replacement, Jeff Blashill, already knows Detroit's pattern of success, winning a Calder Cup with AHL affiliate Grand Rapids in 2013. Desperate to extend the streak, the Wings signed two players—center Brad Richards and defenseman Mike Green—equally desperate to regain past form.

Hoping to break from the past, the rebuilding Maple Leafs have a promising foundation. Morgan Rielly, 21, and Jake Gardiner, 25, two of the NHL's best young offensive defensemen, should benefit from the influence of new coach Babcock, who has a long and positive track record with puck-moving blueliners.

Being a goaltending-first team can be a tenuous proposition no matter how good the netminding (see: Montreal). But when the tandem is an aging Craig Anderson and the unproven Andrew Hammond, who shocked the world with a 20-1-2 NHL debut, it's borderline self-destructive. The Senators' best hope is that a maturing young offense will mitigate the Hamburglar's inevitable return to Earth.

If the ageless Jaromir Jagr can get the most out of rising stars Aleksander Barkov and Jonathan Huberdeau, the Panthers' offense could greatly improve. That said, last year's scoring (2.41 goals per game, 25th in the NHL) set a low bar.

WAIT TILL 2019

Too many of Carolina's talented forwards underperformed last season, so improvement in 2015–16 is expected. But until the Canes' poor goaltending (a conference-worst .902 save percentage) improves, the team isn't going anywhere.

Despite Jake Voracek's 81-point breakout season, the Flyers have too much dead weight on the roster. In 2017, bloated contracts for winger R.J. Umberger ($4.6 million cap hit) and defenseman Mark Streit ($5.25 million) will expire. Only then can healing begin.

Devils goalie Cory Schneider finally emerged from Martin Brodeur's shadow, averaging a .925 save percentage. But the Devils' offense was putrid and remains unimproved.

With new forwards Ryan O'Reilly, Evander Kane and No. 2 pick Jack Eichel, the Sabres have the most fascinatingly imbalanced roster in hockey. The top lines will score, but it's a wasteland behind them. □

locked on things. The criticism. Hockey was 24/7 for him, and he demanded that of his players." Zetterberg volunteers that he never thought this in 2008, of course, when Babcock was coaching Detroit to the Cup. "He'll straighten things out in Toronto, no doubt, because he'll structure 'em up."

Babcock is a master and meticulous game-planner. If he has a flaw, it might be bench micromanagement when he overreaches for favorable matchups. "If a team didn't want [Red Wings star center] Pavel Datsyuk to start in the offensive zone, they knew what player or line to put out against us," Zetterberg says. "I thought we were good enough that teams should have been more worried about matching up with us."

If pain is coming to Toronto, so is solvable problem Nazem Kadri, a core player whose erratic performance could benefit from a double dose of Babcock and Lamoriello. (The Leafs suspended Kadri for three games for oversleeping and reporting late to a practice last March.) Mitch Marner and William Nylander, small but nifty first-rounders of the past two drafts, are in the pipeline. In Detroit, Babcock would tweak the management by saying, "Can't we get some guys with bigger jersey sizes?" At the draft last June, the Red Wings' table good-naturedly gave it back to Babcock when Toronto took the generously listed 5' 11" Marner, 5' 11" defenseman Travis Dermott and 5' 9" Jeremy Bracco with its first three picks. That is not a lot of beef on the hoof.

Borrowing from the Stanley Cup–winning principle of the 2002 Red Wings—nine Hall of Fame players managed nicely with one puck because they all sacrificed for a greater good—the Leafs are convinced that there can never be too much of a good thing. "Nothing's foolproof here," Lamoriello says. "This is professional sports." But if the Leafs show the courage of their convictions, eventually the pain they dispense could be to other teams. Not self-inflicted. □

CONFERENCE

Last year's runners-up in the West, the Ducks, SI's pick to lift the Stanley Cup, will be second to none

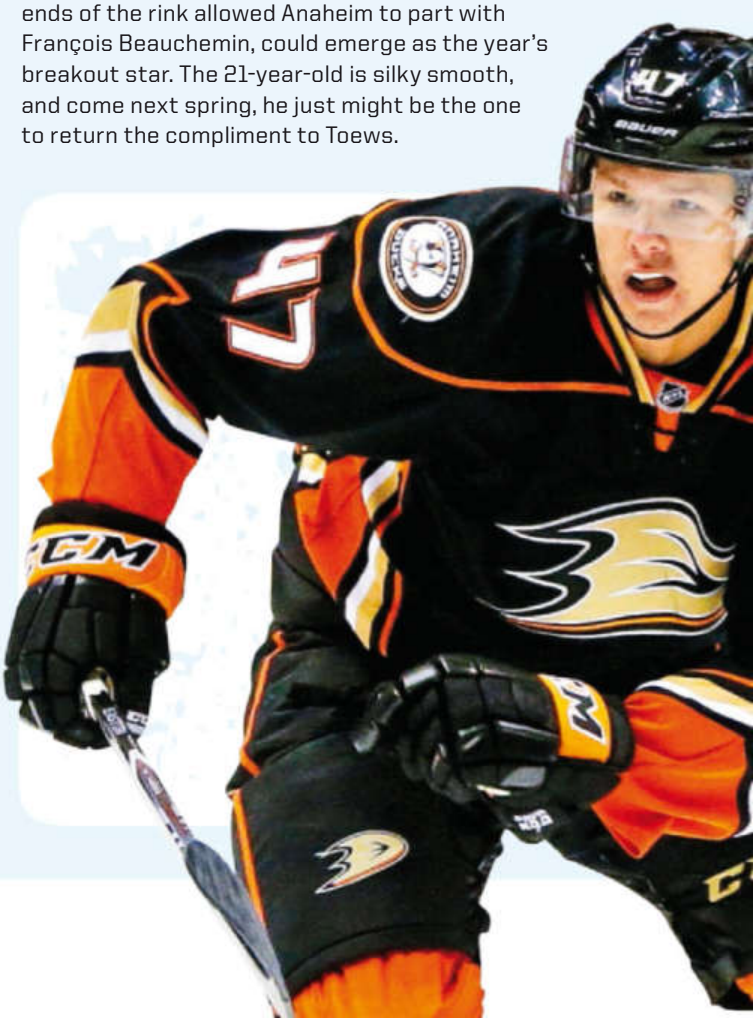
BY ALLAN MUIR

THE PICK

After raising the Stanley Cup in June, Blackhawks captain Jonathan Toews praised the Ducks as the toughest challenge his team had faced. A gracious sentiment, but after three consecutive Pacific Division titles, Anaheim aspires to be more than a memorable speed bump.

Recognizing core forwards Ryan Getzlaf, Corey Perry and Ryan Kesler are all 30 or older, GM Bob Murray acted boldly this summer, using a glut of cap space to shore up the team's depth at every position. He brought in Kevin Bieksa to lend belligerence to the blue line, and wingers Carl Hagelin and Chris Stewart to add punch to an offense that ranked a middling 11th. To support No. 1 goaltender Frederik Andersen, Murray traded for Anton Khudobin, buying time for 22-year-old John Gibson, who will start in the AHL.

Defenseman Hampus Lindholm, whose poise on both ends of the rink allowed Anaheim to part with François Beauchemin, could emerge as the year's breakout star. The 21-year-old is silky smooth, and come next spring, he just might be the one to return the compliment to Toews.



JAE C. HONG/AP

ON THE DOORSTEP

Any other year and the defending champs would be an automatic for the top spot, but salary-cap issues in Chicago forced a significant roster overhaul. Key performers Brandon Saad, Patrick Sharp and Johnny Oduya have been replaced by budget-friendly newcomers: center Artem Anisimov, left wing Artemi Panarin and defenseman Trevor Daley. Meanwhile, star winger Patrick Kane remains the subject of an ongoing sexual assault investigation in Hamburg, N.Y. Though no charges have been brought, the inquiry has been an unwelcome distraction for Chicago.

The Central Division–winning Blues finished in the top five in both scoring (2.91 goals per game) and defense (2.40 goals against) in 2014–15. With a potential 50-goal scorer in 23-year-old winger Vladimir Tarasenko and a healthy Kevin Shattenkirk leading the defense, St. Louis should challenge for the Presidents' Trophy. But reversing the trend of first-round flameouts will be what matters most.

Led by Art Ross winner Jamie Benn (87 points), the Stars' conference-leading offense will be even deadlier in 2015–16 with a healthy Tyler Seguin (77 points in 71 games), new winger Sharp and Valeri Nichushkin, who missed most of last season with a groin injury. The blue line is stout with Oduya and John Klingberg—the West's answer to Ottawa's Norris winner, Erik Karlsson—but neither Kari Lehtonen nor Antti Niemi inspires much confidence between the pipes.

ONE PLAYER AWAY

The Predators stood atop the league standings in mid-March but stumbled to the finish line, winning just six of their final 20 games. So who are they, really? Goalie Pekka Rinne and Norris-caliber defensemen Shea Weber and Roman Josi make Nashville fearsome in its own end. But the offense leans too heavily on centers Mike Ribeiro and Mike Fisher, diminishing 35-year-old assets, for the Preds to be considered elite.

Don't buy forecasts of regression from the #fancystats crowd. After stealing defenseman Dougie Hamilton from Boston in a draft-day trade, the Flames now dress the best young defense in the game. They lack similar depth up front, but Calder finalist Johnny Gaudreau (64 points) and dynamic center Sean Monahan (31 goals) bring enough firepower to make last spring's playoff run a recurring theme.

The best defensive effort in franchise history powered the Jets to their first playoff berth since moving to Winnipeg. But the offense, which relies on a scoring-by-committee approach, needs a breakthrough from a youngster like 22-year-old center Mark Scheifele.

HOW THEY RANK

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The Kings: Stanley Cup champs in 2014; playoff DNQ in '15. Throw in a tumultuous off-season, and Los Angeles remains the West's ultimate wild card. Hulking winger Milan Lucic adds a physical presence with 30-goal potential to the top six, but attrition issues on the back end, highlighted by defenseman Slava Voynov's return to Russia after serving 58 days in a California jail for domestic assault, suggest it'll be touch-and-go for this team.

WAIT TILL NEXT YEAR

After being dealt to Minnesota last January and then single-handedly salvaging the Wild's season, what will netminder Devan Dubnyk offer as an encore to his MVP-worthy 2014–15? It's unfair to expect the 29-year-old journeyman to equal his posttrade 1.78 GAA and .936 save percentage, but anything less will most likely leave Minnesota out in the cold.

A coaching shake-up—Pete DeBoer replaces Todd McLellan—won't be enough to reverse the Sharks' descent into obsolescence. The decision to buttress an aging core (forwards Joe Thornton and Patrick Marleau are 36) with aging free agents (winger Joel Ward and defenseman Paul Martin are 34) highlights the team's talent development problem. And after ranking 24th in goals against last season, GM Doug Wilson is gambling on Kings backup Martin Jones (career: 16-11-2) as his No. 1 netminder. The playoffs have never felt further out of reach in San Jose.

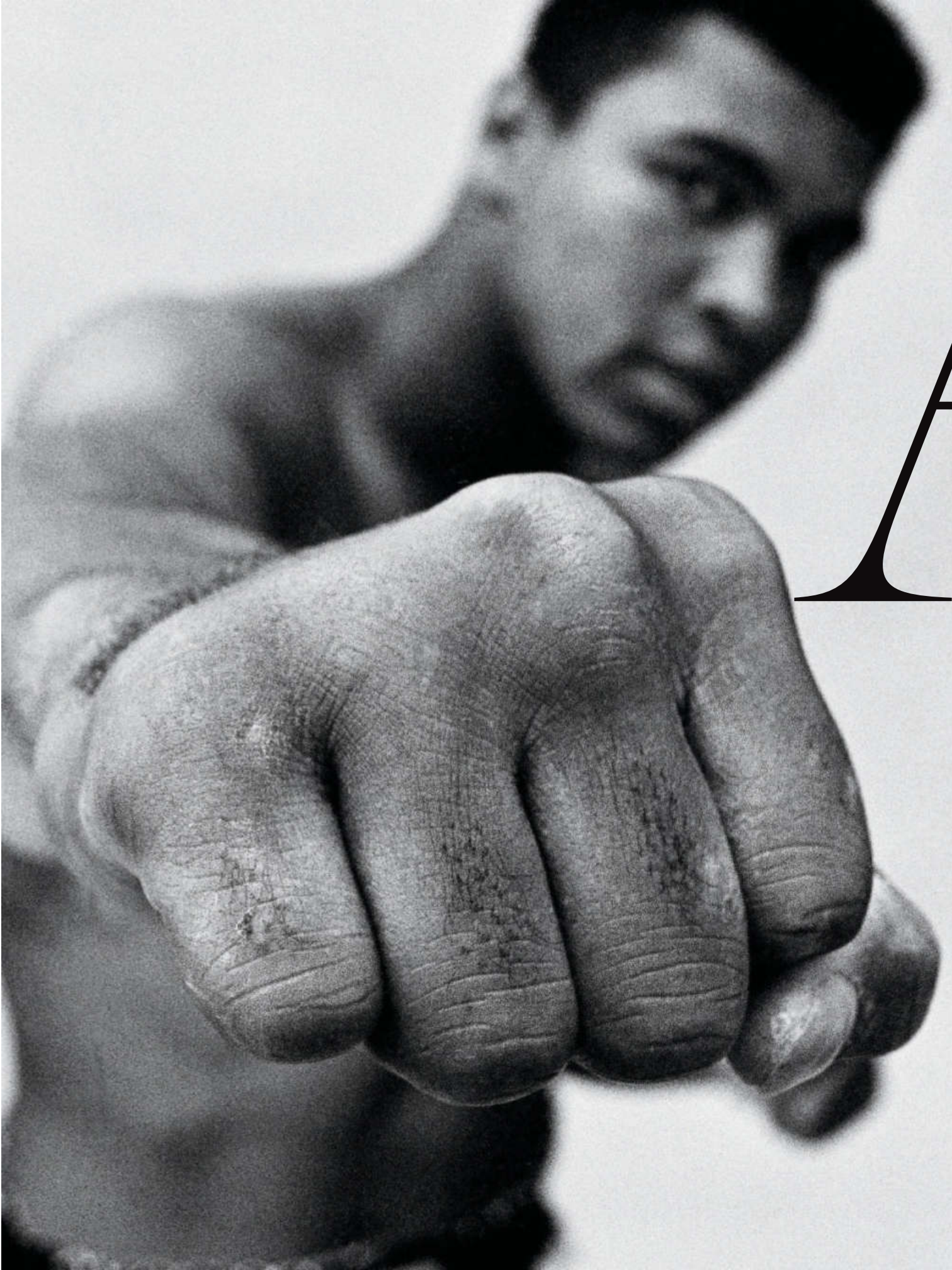
There isn't enough tread left on the tires of 34-year-old forwards Daniel Sedin, Henrik Sedin, Radim Vrbata and Alex Burrows and 35-year-old goalie Ryan Miller to carry the Canucks back into the postseason. Vancouver was a lousy possession team last year, and aging legs will only exacerbate that problem.

WAIT TILL 2019

Edmonton is giddy over the arrival of top pick Connor McDavid—a player Wayne Gretzky called the best prospect since Sidney Crosby—but even Gretzky wouldn't be able to compensate for a defense that allowed a league-worst 276 goals. The pressure to improve there falls largely on former Rangers backup Cam Talbot, who won a No. 1 job with his performance in relief of injured Henrik Lundqvist last year (2.25 GAA and .924 save percentage in 34 starts). But the Oilers' defense is nowhere near as good as New York's.

The Avalanche are counting on forwards Matt Duchene, Gabriel Landeskog and Nathan MacKinnon to propel them back to the playoffs, but Colorado's supporting cast isn't there yet. The Avs' 21st-ranked defense needs to vastly improve.

Winger Max Domi, the Coyotes' first-round pick from 2013, could provide evidence that better days lie ahead. But otherwise, all eyes are focused on the 2016 draft and the prospect of selecting Scottsdale, Ariz., native Auston Matthews with the first pick. □



ALI

Photograph by
THOMAS HOEPKER
Magnum Photos

THE LEGACY

THE GREATEST IS STILL AN INSPIRATIONAL FORCE: IN THE WAY HIS MERE PRESENCE CAN MOVE PEOPLE TO TEARS, IN HIS BRAVE FIGHT AGAINST PARKINSON'S, AND IN THE ANNUAL SI AWARD THAT WILL BEAR HIS NAME

By **TIM LAYDEN**

SOME GUESTS WERE MOVED TO TEARS. ONE WOMAN PUT HER ARM OVER ALI'S SHOULDER AND BURIED HER FACE IN HIS NECK, SOBBING.

THERE WERE three chairs, arranged side by side. Two of them were utilitarian, composed of bent-steel tubing and hard-cloth seats. The one in the middle was different: It looked like a miniature throne, with ornately carved white wood and thick powder-blue cushions. This is where Ali sat for the photos. He wore a black suit with an eggshell-white shirt, a dark tie and dress shoes polished to a glittering shine. His eyes were hidden by large dark glasses. The hair at the top of his head has thinned to near baldness. Behind the chairs was a portable backdrop bearing the logos of The Muhammad Ali Center, here in his native Louisville; the third annual Muhammad Ali Humanitarian Awards, which would be given on this September night at this downtown hotel; and a giant foods corporation that also sponsors the Kentucky Derby.

In a room outside, people waited in line to have their pictures taken with Ali. There were about 40 who would be involved in the night's program as either award recipients or presenters, plus their guests. Among them were an Academy Award–winning actress, a winner of multiple Olympic gold medals and a 13-year-old Pakistani girl who was being honored for her advocacy on behalf of disenfranchised young girls in the rural regions of her country. They all shuffled forward until they reached a doorway guarded by two security men in business suits. Even from there they could not see Ali, because a wide black velvet curtain had been hung from the ceiling. Only upon being admitted, two or three at a time, could they walk around the curtain and see the chairs and the champ.

Ali's sister-in-law, Marilyn Williams, managed the photo operation with the urgency of a grade-school principal conducting a fire drill and with the peppy spirit of a cruise director. *Muhammad, you remember him! Smile, Muhammad!* She would rush forward and help Ali ball his right hand into a fist, which is difficult for him to do on his own because of Parkinson's disease. She would put two fingers on his forehead and tip his head back, because surgery for cervical stenosis two years ago has made it difficult for him to hold his chin up for extended periods. Ali's lips were pursed, his face expressionless. "That's the Parkinson's mask," said his wife, Lonnie. "He feels emotions, but he can't show emotion with his face."

The guests waited before taking their seats next to Ali or

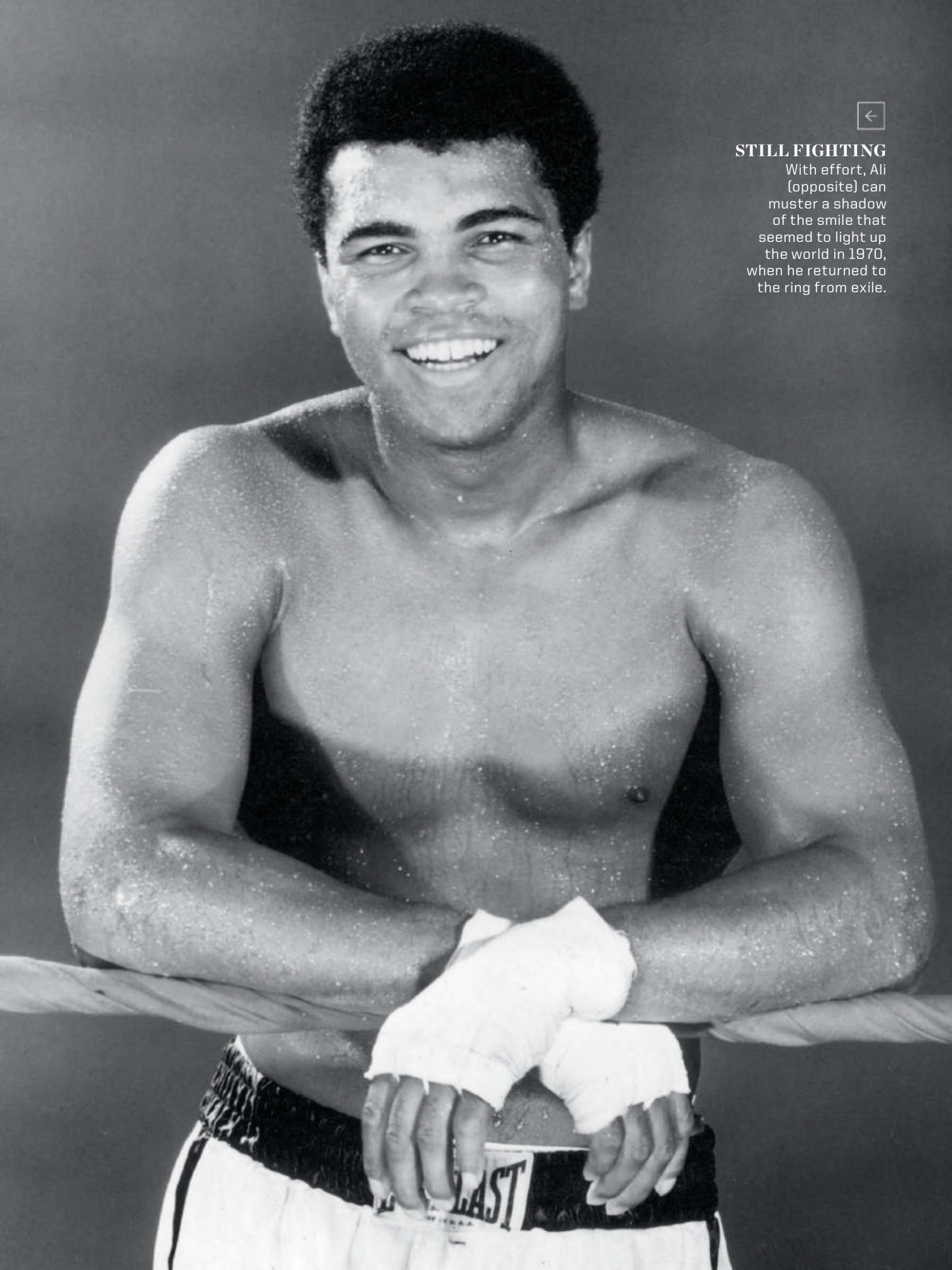


standing behind him, each with an air of reverence. Some of them smiled or made fists of their own. Some were moved to tears. One woman who would be honored later that night put her right arm over Ali's shoulder and buried her face in the crook of his neck, sobbing quietly. "You feel his presence when you walk into the room," said Dhani Jones, a former NFL linebacker who was a presenter at the night's event. "Even though he can't really communicate with you, you hope that just by being near him, something rubs off on you."

Every minute or so, the photographer's flash fired off a burst of light. How many times had Ali looked into these explosions? Thousands? Millions? The guests rose and walked away. Some touched Ali on the arm or the shoulder. ("Now I can die in peace," said one man.) Others took their place, until there was no line anymore and the security staff gathered around Ali for a picture of their own. There were a dozen of them, youthful and strong like Ali once was. They were all too young to have known him then. A young woman assisting with public relations sat demurely next to Ali for a picture; she was younger still.

Finally a wheelchair was hustled in from behind the backdrop. Two security guards lifted Ali from the throne and into the wheelchair. Williams grabbed its handles and pushed Ali past the backdrop, through a narrow doorway and onto a service elevator for the one-floor ride up to the banquet hall, where people would be honored in his name. The picture room lay empty, yet memories had been made and held.

JASON MYERS FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (THIS PAGE); NEIL LEIFER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (OPPOSITE)



STILL FIGHTING
With effort, Ali (opposite) can muster a shadow of the smile that seemed to light up the world in 1970, when he returned to the ring from exile.

"HIS PRESENCE WAS JUST UNREAL," SAYS LEONARD. "HE LOOKED ME IN THE EYE AND TOLD ME I WOULD BE ALL RIGHT, AND IT JUST FELT LIKE THE COMPLETE TRUTH."



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I got a feeling I was born for a purpose. I don't know what I'm here for. I just feel abnormal, a different kind of man. I don't know why I was born. I'm just here. A young man rumbling. I've always had that feeling since I was a little boy. Perhaps I was born to fulfill Biblical prophecies. I just feel I may be part of something—divine things. Everything seems strange to me.
—MUHAMMAD ALI, to SI's Gil Rogin, 1965

ON THE EVENING of Oct. 1, in Louisville, SI will honor Ali by inaugurating the SPORTS ILLUSTRATED Muhammad Ali Legacy Award. It will be given annually, in December, at the same time as SI's Sportsman of the Year award, to honor a former athlete or other sports figure who has used the platform of sports to improve the world. The ceremony with Ali in Louisville comes 40 years to the day after his victory over Joe Frazier in the so-called Thrilla in Manila, a brutal 14-round bout that left both men lionized yet physically diminished. Ali would box 10 more times over the next six years, but that was the last of his truly great fights. Now 73, he is no longer able to do interviews and seldom appears in public. For this story Lonnie Ali allowed me to witness his interaction with guests, which was closed to the public and media. She helped connect me with some of Ali's longtime friends, although several of his closest friends are gone. Wingman Bundini Brown is gone. Trainer Angelo Dundee is gone. Howard Bingham, the photographer who has been Ali's dearest friend for more than half a century, is fighting health battles of his own. Lonnie also encouraged me to send questions to Ali by email and to give him a week or two to answer. A set of questions was sent to Lonnie on Sept. 11; answers came back on Sept. 23. She assured me the responses were Muhammad's and added, "He doesn't talk at length anymore, and that is reflected in his answers."

SI: We are inaugurating this award very close to the 40th anniversary of your fight with Joe Frazier in Manila. Does this fight hold a special place in your heart? Why?

Ali: Well, it was a tough fight. Joe almost won. It was a good fight for both of us. I would only think it's special because it took everything from both of us. We both gave everything in that fight.

SI: Are there other boxing moments that are special to you?

Ali: Yes, when I won my first heavyweight title by beating Sonny Liston and when I won the heavyweight title for the third time, against George Foreman.

THE SEVEN decades of Ali's life cover a vast swath of American cultural transformation. There is little doubt that Ali is the most famous athlete in history and among the most famous humans. As Cassius Clay he won an Olympic gold medal in Rome in 1960, when many sports fans in the U.S. were World War II veterans and their children the first wave of the Baby Boom. As Muhammad Ali he lit the Olympic flame to open the 1996 Games in Atlanta, with the Vietnam War long passed. In one of his last major public appearances, during a telethon following the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, he sat alongside actor Will Smith (who portrayed Ali in the eponymous biographical movie that would be released three months later) and struggled to explain his religion to the nation.

He was, for a very long time, the most polarizing of figures. On Feb. 25, 1964, when he was just 22 years old, he stopped the fearsome Sonny Liston to win the heavyweight title, loosing upon an unsuspecting—and overwhelmingly Caucasian—U.S. public and media an African-American sports star unlike any they had known. In front of cameras before and after that fight, he exhibited the showmanship that would help define his public persona. He recited his own doggerel—*Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee*—and promised not only to take out Liston but also to launch him into orbit. In the ring he was transcendent: a fighter with a big man's power, a little man's speed and a Renaissance painter's creative genius. When that first title fight was over, he stood on the ring ropes, wide-eyed and full of life, waving his gloved right hand and shouting, "I am the greatest! I am the greatest! I'm the king of the world."

Shortly afterward he announced that he had joined the Nation of Islam and changed his name. In 1967, during the Vietnam War, Ali refused induction into the U.S. military as a conscientious objector, on grounds that his religion did not allow participation in war. More famously, he told a reporter, "Man, I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong." It stands as one of the seminal quotes of the 20th century. At the time

TOP: FROM LEFT: TONY TOMSIC/GETTY IMAGES; THE COURIER JOURNAL/AP; JOSE GOITIA/CANADIAN PRESS; PAULA BRONSTEIN/UNICEF/GETTY IMAGES; DAVID TURNLEY/CORBIS; NEIL LEIFER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (FRAZIER FIGHT)





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MAN OF THE WORLD

Aside from beating Frazier in Manila (below), Ali drew support for his Vietnam resistance from fellow athletes in 1967 (1), showed off his Olympic gold in 1960 (2), made humanitarian trips to Cuba in 1998 (3) and Afghanistan in 2002 (4), and was decorated by U.N. secretary general Kofi Annan in 1998 (5).

public sentiment had not yet turned against the war, and Ali was vilified, cast alongside the youth whose antiwar passions were just beginning to find a voice. Columnist Milton Gross of the *New York Post* wrote, "As a fighter, Cassius is good. As a man, he cannot compare to some of the kids slogging through the rice paddies where the names are stranger than Muhammad Ali."

Ali was arrested and stripped of his title; he did not fight for 43 months, from age 25 (while physically vibrant and almost unbeatable) until he was nearly 29 (diminished, a creature of guile and courage). In his third fight back, on March 8, 1971, he lost a unanimous decision to Joe Frazier at Madison Square Garden in what remains one of the most significant prizefights in history.



From that night forward, having risen from the canvas after Frazier knocked him down with the most perfect of left hooks, Ali was something else. Something beyond the beautiful and gifted child who ascended to greatness. Something more than the social activist who surfed the wave of a changing society. Something different from just a fighter or man.

For a decade Ali raged against his fading skills inside the ring, first taking back his title with a stunning 1974 victory over George Foreman in the so-called Rumble in the Jungle in Zaire and a year later beating Frazier in Manila. Two fights past Frazier, as Ali prepared to take on awkward journeyman Jimmy Young in Landover, Md., in the spring of 1976, he was honored by the Touchdown Club of Washington, D.C. In an odd stroke of promotional strategy, the award was presented by Ray Leonard, then 19 and training for what would be a gold-medal-winning performance at the Montreal Olympics. "I'm sitting up there next to Muhammad, and I am freaking out," says Leonard. "His presence was just unreal. It's still unreal. He looked me in the eye and told me I would be all right, and it just felt like the complete truth to me." Afterward Ali gave Leonard three pieces of advice: Be your own man, sign your own checks and hire Angelo Dundee as your trainer (which Leonard did).

Ali staggered to the end of his career, as fighters often do. He gave up his title in an embarrassing loss to Leon Spinks in the winter of 1978, took it back seven months later at age 36 and finished with terrible losses to Larry Holmes and Trevor Berbick from which fans averted their gaze. For the more than three decades since then, Ali has battled with similar passion against the physical decline precipitated by Parkinson's and accelerated by the beatings he absorbed in the ring, even in victory.

Ali became a vessel in which others would find their

better selves, a symbol of perseverance against illness and of resistance to time itself, which surges ever forward. He would be defined less by his own actions than by people's reactions to him, whether in a hotel ballroom or on the largest stages on earth.

SI: Throughout your life, you have touched people just by being yourself. How does this make you feel?

Ali: It makes me feel good, but I don't know if I touch people like you're saying. I only know because people tell me. It's God's blessing if I'm able to touch people and make them feel good about themselves and motivate them to do better.

RON DINICOLA, a son of Italian immigrants who was a boxer in the U.S. Marines, came out of the military in the mid 1970s, graduated from Harvard and then Georgetown Law School and, in '84, moved to Los Angeles and joined the old-line entertainment firm of Mitchell, Silberberg & Knupp. He met Howard Bingham, who subsequently took him to meet Ali at Ali's mansion in the Hancock Park section of L.A. Soon thereafter, while Lonnie Ali was remaking Ali's support team, she brought DiNicola on board. He has been there ever since, and the former champ has fascinated him. "When I first met Muhammad," says DiNicola, 59, "he could walk in one door at the airport empty-handed and walk out with 16 deals sticking out of his pockets, some of which he had signed. He assumed the best in everyone."





HERO TO ALL
Diminished in part from his battles with Frazier (above, in 1971), Ali is still an inspiration to people as diverse as Evans (right) and Bill Clinton (opposite).

DiNicola traveled the world with Ali and witnessed the remarkable power of his name. In 1993 they went to South Africa, arriving on April 10, the day of the assassination of anti-apartheid leader Chris Hani. "By the time we got into the terminal, there was pandemonium," says DiNicola. "There was a convulsive emotion in the air. People were grieving, and it was as if they wanted to lay their grief at Ali's feet, because they adored him so much. There was a lot of jostling, and security was getting rough with people and Ali just said to the police, 'Cool it, cool it, ease up.' They put a table in the doorway, and Ali stood on the table. The security people held his belt so that he could gesture without falling, and the crowd was just roaring and roaring."

On the night of July 19, 1996, in a surprise astonishingly kept secret until the last moment, Ali lit the flame to commence the Atlanta Olympic Games. He stood with the torch quivering in his right hand as he accepted the flame from Janet Evans, then 24, a swimmer who had won four gold medals in the previous two Olympics. A primal roar washed over the stadium. Evans, who was also competing in those Games, was told only the night before that she, as the penultimate torch-bearer, would be passing the flame to Ali, whom she knew only as an important name from some distant history. "I didn't understand the reverence," says Evans. "I didn't understand it until the stadium started shaking, like an earthquake."

Evans had reached a crossroads in her own career. She had won three gold medals at 16 and another one at 20, but now she was unlikely to win any more (and, in fact, did not). "At that point in my life I was struggling to find the real meaning of the Olympics," says Evans. "They are supposed to mean people getting out on that stage and doing their best. In America it means win gold medals. But then you see this man, and he's come back to the Olympics, in the South, after the civil rights movement, and with his physical issues, and he was so courageous to stand there in front of the world."

Ali and Evans left the stadium immediately after the torch lighting, and Ali was hustled into a vehicle and driven away in a phalanx of Georgia state police vehicles. Evans's ride took slightly longer to arrive, and she waited with a security guard on the sidewalk. "I never cried after winning a gold medal," Evans says. "I hardly ever cry. But after Ali was whisked away, I just put my head on the security guy's shoulder and started bawling."

After Ali agreed to participate in the 9/11 telethon, which took place at three locations 10 days after the attacks, he went to CBS's Los Angeles studios with longtime friend Bernie Yuman,

THE RING MAGAZINE/GETTY IMAGES (FRAZIER); LYNN JOHNSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (TORCHES)



"PEOPLE WANT TO KNOW MUHAMMAD IS WELL," SAYS LONNIE. "IT'S A REMEMBRANCE OF YOUTH. IF HE'S O.K., THEY'RE O.K."

who first met Ali in 1962, when Yuman was 13, while jogging on a golf course in Miami. "We came into the studio that night," says Yuman, "and all of these famous celebrities are manning the phones. They would come and go, but the action never stopped. Then Ali walked in, and everything did stop. All of the actors and stars stopped answering phones and crowded around Ali." It is a familiar story: When Ali arrives, the room stops.

The source of his influence is difficult to pinpoint. DiNicola suggests that throughout the world outside U.S. borders, Ali is beloved for taking on his mighty government all those years ago. Leonard says, "He spoke up for people who couldn't speak up for themselves." There is also empathy for his health struggles. Thomas Hauser, who wrote the 1991 biography *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, says, "There has been a concerted effort by many people in recent years to grind down the rough edges of Ali's legacy, but there is also an aura of love and pure goodwill about Ali. In his presence, even people who didn't like Ali liked Ali." In the end, though, Ali has become that rarest of humans, beloved not mostly for what he did but simply for who he is.

SI: How would you like to be remembered as an athlete?
Ali: As the best heavyweight boxer of all time.
SI: As a person?
Ali: As a good person who tried to be kind to everyone.

ALI SPENDS most of his time in Arizona, where he is involved annually with the 20-year-old Celebrity Fight Night, a charity event that has raised more than $100 million. A portion of that benefits the Muhammad Ali Parkinson Center at Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix. Muhammad and Lonnie spend several weeks a year at homes in Louisville and Berrien Springs, Mich. The generations that have been touched by Ali's life and career wonder about his health as his public appearances become more infrequent and more distressing to witness. "People want to know Muhammad is well," says Lonnie. "It's a remembrance of youth. If he's O.K., they're O.K."

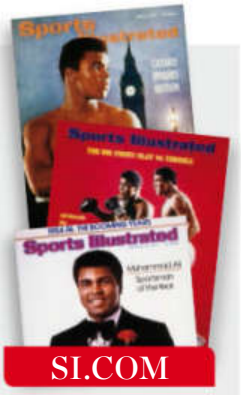
Ali has been suffering from some form of Parkinson's for 35 years, according to Lonnie, dating back to his final two fights. It is a progressive disease. In 2006 he fell several times, which family members attributed to the Parkinson's but which was in fact mostly related to cervical stenosis, for which he underwent surgery. "It was corrected," says Lonnie, "but it has compromised his balance." Ali began using a walker shortly afterward and now also uses a wheelchair, although reluctantly. Last December he developed a urinary-tract infection and then contracted sepsis, which left him hospitalized and seriously ill for three weeks. His visit to Louisville in September was his first trip since that illness.

These ongoing health challenges, says Lonnie, have dulled Ali's spirit in only some ways. He watches hours of television, often the Encore Western channel, but he also likes to pull up YouTube videos of his younger self. He enjoys the interviews more than the fights: images of a young man full of words and thoughts, shouted to a world unprepared for his spirit. He occasionally watches the fights, too, and other sporting events. He can converse but not always and not easily. "It's the luck of the draw," says DiNicola. "On a given day you might get more than on another day."

He loves the company of children but has difficulty smiling or laughing to demonstrate his happiness. "He doesn't care about having Parkinson's," says Lonnie, "but he doesn't like being the center of attention anymore. Muhammad was always an entertainer, and he can't do that anymore. There was a time when you couldn't take a bad picture of Muhammad. He was just a beautiful human specimen. Now he's become very self-conscious about how he looks in photographs. He's lost friends, and he gets melancholy about that. But people should know that Muhammad does not have regrets, except that he didn't spend more time with his children. [Ali has nine.] But he has enjoyed every moment of his life."

It's impossible to know for certain, of course, what lies deep in the man's soul. A life so large, ending so small. But that is what life often does. Few people have left more behind than Ali. Few will be remembered longer.

SI: How do you feel?
Ali: Good. □



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MANNY CENETA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



The Fog of The Fight

→ BY CHRIS NILAN

THE FIRST TIME I met Todd Ewen, in late November 1991, he didn't properly introduce himself. I was playing for the Bruins, he was with Montreal, and he ambushed me, throwing a couple of uppercuts. I had 222 regular-season NHL fights, but this wasn't one of them. We received slashing and roughing minors.

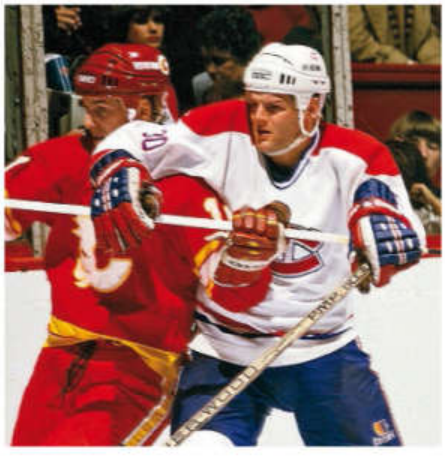
The next time was a few months later, after the Canadiens picked me up on waivers near the end of my career. Ewen was a friendly guy, but we didn't warm to each other right away. Then I saw him drawing on the team plane. He'd sketch monsters and superheroes. Really good, too. He told me he collected comic books. He had a rare *Superman* from back in the day, and *Captain America* and stuff. Todd was more Picasso than Hercules.

When I heard the sickening news last week that he'd died, at 49, my first question was, How? Car accident? Heart attack? Then I got a call from my best friend, in Boston: It was a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

In recent years there has been a string of suicides and other hockey players whose lives ended much too soon. Wade Belak was 35. Derek Boogaard, 28. Rick Rypien, 27. Steve Montador, 35. These guys were all fighters or, in Montador's case, a physical guy. Now Todd.

In the aftermath of his death, everybody's been in a hurry to connect the dots in a straight line—from hockey fights to concussions to CTE to depression to suicide. It strikes me, a guy whose nickname is Knuckles, as all too simple. Maybe people should draw a circle instead, examining the whole person's life, who he was and not just what he did for a living. You have to wonder what in their pasts allowed these guys to get to the point where they could do the most difficult job in sports. What fueled their anger and ability to summon that aggression on demand? Kelly Chase, a pretty tough kid when he played, once compared the anguish of a hockey fighter to that of a boy sitting in class, watching the clock, waiting for the three o'clock bell and knowing that when it rang, he was going to have to fight on the playground. No other job in sports tests you physically, mentally and emotionally like being an enforcer. Todd said he was never afraid of getting into a fight, just of losing one—because if he did, he might lose his job.

I don't necessarily want to see **fighting removed** from hockey. But I don't think it belongs there anymore.



Tough Road Nilan (in white) spent 13 years in the NHL trenches with the Canadiens, Rangers and Bruins.

After I left hockey the emotional and physical pain lingered, even while I tried to drown it in alcohol and fool it with Percocet, OxyContin and finally heroin. I never thought of killing myself, though inadvertently I almost did. (Heroin is the last step before you die.) I'm 57 now. I've been clean for more than four years. I have an amazing girlfriend, Jaime Holtz. I work out four times a week with my trainer, Stéphane Therrien, who has helped me rebuild the strength and alleviate the pain in my hands after a 688-game career in which I took many of my 3,043 penalty minutes five at a time. I host an afternoon radio show in Montreal. It's all good.

I like fighters because they are selfless guys who stick up for their teammates and their teams. But I won't sugarcoat this: While I don't necessarily want to see fighting removed from the NHL, I don't think it belongs there anymore. Does that make sense? When two players are pissed at each other and it's like, *O.K., let's settle this*, I see nothing wrong with it. But as a tactic, I don't like it. I look back at some of the melees I was in with Montreal in the 1980s—the Good Friday Massacre with the Nordiques, the pregame fight with Philadelphia, the Boston brawls—and a lot of it seems nonsensical. I'm embarrassed by some of that stuff.

I'm not a born-again abolitionist, but thinking about what's happened, how life has changed, hockey fighting looks to be past its expiration date. I don't know how people will react when they read that Chris Nilan, the last gladiator, thinks hockey fighting has outlived its usefulness. Maybe they'll be outraged. Or maybe they'll think I never got a concussion, that I still have my head on my shoulders. RIP, Todd. □

COURTESY OF TSN (TOP); DENIS BRODEUR/NHLI/GETTY IMAGES

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